The Unbearable Lightness of EFL

Scott Thornbury

In this section we present contrasting views on a topic of current interest. The first article is one that has been reviewed by the editorial panel and accepted for publication; the second is a commissioned response, to which the author of the original article is invited to make a brief reply.

Reactions from readers are particularly sought, either in the form of a letter to the Editor, or as a brief article (no more than 1,250 words), which will be considered for publication in the normal way.

This paper argues that EFL suffers from low self-esteem, and, as a result, has attempted to re-invent itself in at least two ways. One of these is by taking the ‘high road’—lured by the (sham?) respectability of academia and professionalism. Another is inward—into the arcane and the ‘folksy’—as represented by therapeutic models of pedagogy. This paper suggests that there is a third direction worth exploring: outward. By aligning themselves with their learners in a shared dialogue of discovery, teachers may not only improve their classroom practice, but achieve a measure of professional satisfaction. The paper sketches the potential of this third path, and draws some implications for teacher education.

In The Cambridge International Dictionary of English the following citation appears under the entry for ‘end up’:

After working her way around the world, she ended up teaching English as a foreign language.

And, in a novel by Ruth Rendell (The Tree of Hands), one character confesses to another:

I’m older . . . and I’ve lost any ambition of my own. I’d be content to take any routine job I could get. There’s a course going teaching English to foreign students. I could get in on that. I’ve got a degree. I’d be quite content for you to go on in your high-flying way and be a humble teacher myself.

Both quotes reflect fairly accurately the public perception of TEFL—at least in Britain: that it is a low status, even slightly disreputable thing to do. This may be due in part to its association with easily-acquired vocational work of dubious legality, as evidenced in backpacking guides:
Teaching English is one of the easiest ways of getting a job in France . . . (France: The Rough Guide 1995: 58).

It is possible to make a living in a city teaching English: scan the noticeboards of universities, where schools advertise for English teachers, no questions asked. (Brazil: The Rough Guide 1994: 13).

Those working in EFL who are concerned by this implied lack of status² have responded by attempting to upgrade EFL and to re-construe it in terms of one of two models. These I shall label respectively the academic model and the therapeutic model.

The academic model

Much has been made of the need to raise and/or maintain standards in order to ensure the professionalism of EFL. But the question remains: Is TEFL really a profession? And, if so, what standards should it be judged by?

Two defining characteristics of a profession are, according to Lortie (1975), restricted entry, and a homogeneous consensual knowledge base. How does EFL measure up? It is unlikely that entry to EFL can be restricted in any mandated way (at least for native-speakers), especially where the market place continues to tolerate the idea of ‘barefoot teachers’. Little mileage is to be gained by raising the entry bar, when many would-be teachers can simply side-step it, ‘no questions asked’.

The thrust towards professionalism, therefore, has mainly focused on emphasizing the consensual knowledge base of EFL. In order to counteract the view that anyone can teach English, the stakes have been raised. It is not enough to be a competent speaker of the language, nor even to have a working knowledge of pedagogical grammar. Instead, ‘much more systematic attention to descriptive linguistics and to applied linguistics [is] needed, both in all kinds of language-linked first degrees and in inservice education (Mitchell 1994: 222). Widdowson (1998a) provided further support for this view in an article in the EL Gazette (subtitled ‘Understand linguistics and become a better teacher’):

Like other professional people (doctors, lawyers, accountants), teachers claim authority because of specialist knowledge and expertise . . . The subject for language teachers is a language, and so it is obviously this that they need to know about . . . A knowledge of the subject, English as a foreign language, presupposes some knowledge at least about language as a whole . . . In other words, knowing the language subject depends in some degree on the study of linguistics . . . This is the thinking behind Oxford Introductions to Language Study, a new series published by OUP . . . valuable (not to say invaluable) resource books for those who teach the subject English as a foreign language, and are concerned with the integrity of their profession.

Note the chain of dependency implied in this argument: teaching depends on knowing about language; knowledge about language depends on the study of linguistics; the study of linguistics depends on the good offices of universities and publishers. Or, as another professor puts it: ‘Those who teach languages depend on those who describe them’ (Sinclair 1997: 29). This is what Paolo Freire has called the ‘banking’ concept of education, according to which ‘knowledge is a gift bestowed

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by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.’ (1970, 1993: 53). Typically, it is the bestower and not the bestowed who decides that the gift is valuable (not to say invaluable). The discourse mode of such a dependency culture is what Freire calls ‘anti-dialogue’—a chain of command that does not communicate, but rather issues communiqués. The chain of transmission does not, of course, stop at the teacher: those who learn languages depend on those who teach them, and to this end descriptive linguistics feeds a pedagogy that delivers little else but re-constituted grammar pabulum. In short, ‘the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students’ (Freire, ibid.: 54).

Note also the appeal to professional integrity in Widdowson’s article, and the analogy he draws between other professions and the knowledge bases that validate their professional authority. But the assumption that language as a subject is of the same order of subject as medicine, law, or physics, is ill-founded. For a start, language can be both the subject and the medium of instruction. It need not even be the subject at all, in any strict sense: being the medium of instruction may be sufficient. This, of course, is the view that underpins immersion teaching and ‘strong CLT’:

‘Within communicative approaches, where the teacher can orchestrate the exposure of the learners to the language without having to be the source of the language or of explanations about the language, it is conceivable that declarative knowledge of the subject matter (knowledge of the language) is not necessary for the goals to be accomplished’ (Woods 1996: 194).

This is also the thinking underlying the recruitment of unqualified native speaker backpackers, who, in the absence of both training and subject knowledge, often have no recourse but to talk to their students. Whether this represents the most effective approach to language education is not the issue: the fact that a second language can be acquired (whether or not it always is) weakens Widdowson’s claim for the centrality of linguistics, and suggests that teachers might look elsewhere for their subject. They could do worse, for example, than look at theories of education for their knowledge base. In other words, they could concern themselves more with the how of teaching, rather than simply with the what. It has been a preoccupation with the what that has artificially inflated the status of grammar and fuelled the current transmission-style orthodoxy. As Widdowson himself admits: ‘A lot of time is wasted in trying to teach things that can only be learned by experience’ (1998b: 715).

An alternative response to TEFL’s lack of respectability is to construe it as a form of therapy. Professional self-esteem is achieved by co-opting both the discourse and the procedures of certain new age practices, and by investing the teacher with an almost shamanistic function. Sometimes these links are explicit:

For classes that find it hard to concentrate: 3 drops of Cedarwood, 2 drops of Frankincense, 2 drops of Ylang Ylang. (Power 1997: 10)
More often, the discourse of therapy is interwoven into a quasi-humanistic and anodyne concern for personal growth and social hygiene. Arnold, for example, urges teachers to embrace an affective agenda because ‘it might lead to a more holistic development of our students as individuals and as responsible participants in a healthy society’ (1999: 24). Currently popular in this paradigm is Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP), which, according to the publicity material for a recent book on the subject (Revell and Norman 1997) ‘is an attitude to life and a collection of techniques, models and strategies to facilitate personal growth and learning’. Personal growth in this kind of discourse is equated with improved self-esteem, but it often seems that it is as much the teacher’s self-esteem that is being targeted as that of the student’s. Unsurprisingly, NLP literature can only be found in the self-help section of bookstores. Practitioners complain of the lack of recognition accorded NLP in professional journals, but until they can produce plausible evidence for its effectiveness, such recognition is unlikely to be forthcoming. Even Earl Stevick is unconvinced:

A number of studies have failed to confirm some of NLP’s basic predictions. My own tentative conclusion, therefore, is that . . . we would do well to approach NLP’s theory, and to use its techniques, with some caution. (1996: 102)

This is not to imply that practising teachers should reject practices that have not yet been sanctioned by researchers: that would be to fall into the academic dependency trap again. Nevertheless, a strong health warning should be attached to therapeutic practices when applied to non-therapeutic situations. If they work, they are liable to create a culture of dependency; if they don’t work, they simply alienate. In the end, learners may feel as excluded by the discourse of therapy as they do by the discourse of transmission.

A third way?

There is, I believe, an alternative route to professional self-esteem, which I will label the dialogic model. By (re-)orienting themselves in the direction of their learners, neither as transmitters of language facts nor as healers, but simply as co-participants in the shared classroom culture, teachers may realize that they occupy a privileged space on the frontier between languages, and hence on the frontier between cultures, and that as a result they are uniquely situated to mediate contact through dialogue. It is the potential—and the risk—that such dialogue offers that rescues language teaching from the realm of the humdrum (including its blinkered fixation on grammatical form).

In contradistinction to the anti-dialogic banking model of education, Freire proposed a pedagogy based on dialogue, in which teachers and students share responsibility for learning as they engage in the borderland between different cultures, languages, and social groupings. Central to this border pedagogy is ‘the important task of affirming the voices that students bring to school and challenging the separation of school knowledge from the experience of everyday life’ (Giroux 1997: 159).

This is a view that finds an echo in social constructivist theories of education, such as those propounded by Bruner and Vygotsky, in which

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learning is jointly constructed through talk. Indeed, Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* is an apt metaphor for the interzone, the no-man's land where language teachers live and work. Kramsch describes the potential of the foreign language classroom to provide a *liminal* experience that creates a special space and time at the boundaries between two views of the world* (1993: 30).

Effectively, this means breaking down the them-and-us polarity inherent in the academic and therapeutic models of teaching. It means recognizing the social and interactional nature of language learning. It may even mean re-appraising attitudes toward the 'backpacker school of teaching', in which teacher and learners simply talk about things that concern them.

Such an enterprise is not without risks, as any teacher knows who has taken the time to engage with the experiences, values, and beliefs of their students. As Giroux (op. cit.) notes: 'The contradictory and complex histories and stories that give meaning to the lives of students are never innocent and it is important that they be recognized for their contradictions as well as their possibilities' (1997: 159). But the gains in terms of professional self-esteem may well be worth that risk: 'A dialogic pedagogy is unlike traditional pedagogy . . . it sets new goals for teachers—poetic, psychological, political goals that . . . do not constitute any easy-to-follow method . . . Such a pedagogy should better be described, not as a blueprint for how to *teach* foreign languages, but as another way of being a language teacher' (Kramsch 1993: 31).

What are the implications for training of a re-envisioning of the teacher’s role in this way? Briefly:

- No amount of ‘knowledge’ will transform a bad teacher into a good one. It may even make a bad one worse. Nor, with respect, will two drops of *ylang ylang* transform a fail lesson into a pass one. Instead, teacher trainers need to impress upon trainees that teaching is a dialogic, rather than an anti-dialogic or a monologic, activity. The saddest complaint ever relayed to me by a student was: ‘Our teacher doesn’t talk to us.’
- It may be the case that experienced teachers need to be de-skilled: that they need to be taught how to talk rather than to teach. Training in communication skills should perhaps be incorporated into pre- and in-service courses. More importantly, teachers may need to be reminded that their students are sentient human beings, with experiences, values, and beliefs that can provide valuable (not to say invaluable) lesson content.
- Training teachers to talk does not mean that they relinquish their pedagogical responsibilities, however. Rather, it means developing the skills to provide and exploit opportunities for learning within the dialogic context—through, for example, the use of scaffolding and recasts. In other words, it means being trained in what is called *instructional conversation*. (For one way of doing this, see Thornbury 1996).
- At the same time, trainers should try to convey a sense of the excitement, danger, and risk involved in crossing boundaries, both linguistic and cultural, and to show that such excitement, danger, and risk is an integral part of language learning. Anyone who has ever travelled has an anecdote...
to share about the hazards, as well as the unforeseen joys, involved in intercultural communication. Such stories can provide a rich seam of content on a training course.

Finally, as a profession we should worry less about what other people think of us, and concern ourselves more with what we are good at: being out there, at the front, in the firing line, on the edge. Few jobs can offer as much. The lightness of EFL is dizzying. But we need to guard against respectability. As Auden wrote: ‘The sense of danger must not disappear.’

Notes
1 This paper is a revised version of a plenary talk given at the International House Teacher Training Conference in London, February 1999.
2 Of course, the same stigma does not necessarily attach to those who used to be referred to coyly as ‘overseas teachers of English’, i.e. teachers typically working in state schools in their home countries, and for whom English is a second (or third, etc.) language. Most of these have trained long and hard to achieve a measure of local respect, and can claim to have earned the professionalism that still eludes the so-called native speaker EFL teacher (NEST). However, they—the non-NESTS—often suffer a different kind of complex through being considered (and even considering themselves) somehow second-rate in comparison with the NESTs, an injustice which has been exposed by Medgyes (1992), among others. My comments are focused, therefore, not so much on the non-NESTS as on the NESTs, and a separate account may be necessary to describe how the former have responded to their own particular sense of being undervalued.

References


The author
Scott Thornbury lives and works in Barcelona. He has been a teacher, teacher trainer, MA student, director of studies, school director, and materials writer. He has also written three books about language, and has just finished a fourth, How to Teach Vocabulary (Pearson Education). He is currently co-editing a book on critical pedagogy called Teaching Unplugged.
Email: sthornbury@pop.wanadoo.es

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