

# The Changing Face of TESOL

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My work as a teacher educator, academic, and textbook author, working in several different continents and a dozen different countries over the past 30 years or so, has, provided me with a fascinating and rewarding career. It has enabled me to work with teachers and teacher educators in places like China, Brazil, Oman, Singapore, Indonesia, Mexico, and Hawaii and provided opportunities to witness and participate in many different aspects of the world-wide profession of English language teaching.

Over the past 30 years I have had the privilege of getting to know and work with some of the heroes and leaders in our profession. Here I would like to pay a special tribute to one such hero, James Alatis, whose efforts and vision lead to the establishment of the TESOL organization, and who early in my career offered me important guidance and encouragement. The friendship I have enjoyed with Jim and his wife Penny has been much treasured over many years.

As a university-based teacher educator for most of my career, I have been privileged to be part of a community of professionals who have been involved both in developing as well as delivering the academic knowledge-base of our profession. Part of this process involves subjecting our professional beliefs and practices to ongoing critical self-examination and renewal. For at conventions like this one, we are reminded that we belong to a field that is very receptive to new ideas and practices. We have seen this when new ideologies such as critical pedagogy or learner-centredness become sanctioned by the profession, when innovations such as task-based instruction or blended learning become fashionable or dominant, or by responses to new technology such as when the potential of the World Wide Web catches the imagination of teachers. Part of my talk today will focus on some of the changes that our profession is undergoing as a result of what can be called internal self-renewal.

However as well as changes in our professional understandings and practices that are internally motivated, by which I mean that they arise from research, from paradigm shifts within the profession, or as a result of the contributions of some

of our influential thinkers and leaders, there are also other important external factors that impact on our work as teachers and teacher educators. These reflect the changing status of English in the lives of many people around the world.

For in recent years there has been a dramatic change in the scope of English language teaching world wide and consequently, growing demands on those charged with providing an adequate response to the impact of the world-wide spread of English. Increasingly an English-proficient work force in many key sectors of the economy as well as the ability to access the educational, technical, and knowledge resources that English provides, are seen as essential features of contemporary societies. But the demand for competent English users, as well as adequately prepared English teachers, often exceeds the supply.

It is this gap between demand and supply that provides the motivation for endless cycles of curriculum review and innovation in many parts of the world. In those countries that do well in terms of the English language learning stakes, this often involves merely fine tuning national language teaching policies and practices, which is what the Council of Europe's Common European Framework seems to be about. In other parts of the world, however, more drastic measures are often needed, including increasing the time allocated to English in public education, commencing the teaching of English at primary school, teaching some school subjects through English, importing native-speakers to work alongside national teachers in high schools, or increasing the weighting given to English in University Entrance exams. And there is also a demand by national educational authorities in many places for new language teaching policies, for greater central control over teaching and teacher education, and for standards and other forms of accountability.

Then there are pressures from within the language teaching field, as the profession continually reinvents itself through the impact of new ideas, new educational philosophies, and new research paradigms, and teachers are expected to keep up with the changes.

I would like to use the opportunity offered here to reflect a little on some of these changes and how they are redefining the nature of our profession and our work as teacher educators and teachers. I will comment first on some of the internally generated changes I referred to above, before looking at the impact of external factors.

## **SOME CHANGES FROM WITHIN**

### ***Situated conceptions of teaching***

Our understanding of what we mean by good teaching and what teachers need to know in order to teach well, has changed considerably over the years. One reason for this is because we have come to recognize that conceptions of good teaching differ from culture to culture. In some cultures the conventional view of a good teacher is one who controls and directs learners and who maintains a respectful distance between the teacher and the learners. Teaching is a transmission process and learners are the recipients of the teacher's expertise. In other cultures, the teacher is viewed more as a facilitator. The ability to form close interpersonal relations with students is highly valued. There is a strong emphasis on individual learner creativity and independent learning is encouraged. Students may even be encouraged to question and challenge what the teacher says.

Look at these quotations from teachers around the world and note how they reflect different views of what a good teacher is:

*When I present a reading text to the class, the students expect me to go through it word by word and explain every point of vocabulary or grammar. They would be uncomfortable if I left it for them to work it out on their own or if I asked them just to try to understand the main ideas. (Egyptian EFL teacher).*

*If a student doesn't succeed, it is my fault for not presenting the materials clearly enough. If a student doesn't understand something I must find a way to present it more clearly. (Taiwanese EFL teacher).*

*If I do group work or open-ended communicative activities, the students and other colleagues will feel that I'm not really teaching them. They will feel that I didn't have anything really planned for the lesson and that I'm just filling in time. (Japanese EFL teacher).*

The way a person teaches and his or her view of what good teaching is will therefore reflect his or her cultural background and personal history, as well as the context in which he or she is working, and the kind of students in his or her class. For this reason teaching is sometimes said to be "situated" and can only be understood within a particular context. This creates a particular dilemma for many English teachers, who are sometimes positioned between cultures with different values and expectations.

For example, here is a comment by an Australian student studying Chinese in China and reacting to the Chinese approach to teaching:

*The trouble with Chinese teachers is that they've never done any real teacher-training courses so they don't know how to teach. All they do is follow the book. They never give us any opportunity to talk. How in the world do they expect us to learn?*

Compare this with the comments of a Chinese student studying in Australia:

*Australian teachers are very friendly but they can't teach very well. I never know where they're going – there's no system and I just get lost. Also, they're often very badly trained and don't have a thorough grasp of their subject.*

Sociocultural theories of teaching hence refer to teaching as “situated social practice” – practice that is shaped by the context in which it occurs.

### ***A changing knowledge base***

There have traditionally been two strands within TESOL – one focussing on classroom teaching skills and pedagogic issues, and the other focussing on what has been perceived as the academic underpinnings of classroom skills, namely knowledge about language and language learning. The relationship between the two has often been problematic. These two strands provide what has come to be the established core curriculum of TESOL training programs, particularly at the graduate level, where course work on topics such as language analysis, discourse analysis, phonology, curriculum development, and methodology is standard. The language-based courses provided the academic content, and the methodology courses show teachers how to apply such knowledge in their teaching. An unquestioned assumption was that such knowledge informs teachers' classroom practices. Recent research however shows that teachers in fact are often unable to apply such knowledge in their classrooms and that teachers draw on other sources of knowledge in the classroom. Despite knowing the theory and principles associated with Communicative Language Teaching for example, in their own teaching teachers are often seen to make use of more traditional activities in their classrooms. Donald Freeman and others have raised the issue of the relevance of the traditional knowledge base of language teaching, observing, “The knowledge-base is largely drawn from other disciplines, and not from the work of teaching itself”. Responding to this charge, innovative teacher education programs now seek to expand the knowledge base of language teaching to include the processes of teaching and teacher-learning itself, and the beliefs, theories and teacher knowledge which informs teaching. Rather than the MA course being a survey of issues in applied linguistics drawing from the traditional

disciplinary sources, course work in areas such as reflective teaching, narrative inquiry, classroom research, and action research are now included as parts of the core curriculum in such programs.

### ***From designer-methods to teacher-designed methods***

Those of you who have been in this profession for a while will remember not so far back when Communicative Language Teaching came to replace Audiolingualism and when novel methods as Total Physical Response, The Silent Way, and Counseling Learning proposed new approaches to teaching that would revitalize language learning. Thirty years or more later, while Communicative Language Teaching is still alive, though in different forms, many of the “novel” methods of the 1970s have largely disappeared. And so to a large extent has the question that attracted so much interest at that time: “What is the best method to teach a second or foreign language?” We are now in what has been termed the post methods era.

Many of the more innovative methods of recent years have had a fairly short shelf-life. Because they were linked to very specific claims and to prescribed practices they tended to fall out of favor as these practices became unfashionable or discredited. One of the strongest criticisms of the “new methods” was that they were typically “top-down”. Teachers had to accept on faith the claims or theory underlying the method and apply them in their own practice. Good teaching was regarded as correct use of the method and its prescribed principles and techniques. What is called the “post methods” era has thus lead to a focus on the processes of learning and teaching rather than ascribing a central role to methods as the key to successful teaching. As language teaching moved away from a search for the perfect method, attention shifted to how teachers could develop their own personalized teaching methods. These reflect core principles derived from subject-knowledge, contextual knowledge, experience, and their own personal theories, values and beliefs.

### ***Changed understanding of the nature of teacher education***

As commentators (e.g. Freeman) on the history of our profession have pointed out, such as TESOL in the form that we know it today dates from the 1960s, when specific approaches to teacher training for language teachers began. The discipline of applied linguistics dates from the same period, and with it came a body of specialized academic knowledge and theory that provided the foundation of the new discipline. At the same time we began to distinguish between “teacher

training” and “teacher development”, the former being identified with entry-level teaching skills linked to a specific teaching context, and the latter to the longer-term development of the individual teacher over time. Qualifications in teacher training such as the RSA Certificate were typically offered by teacher training colleges or by organizations such as the British Council. Teacher development on the other hand meant mastering the discipline of applied linguistics. Qualifications in teacher development, typically the MA degree, were offered by universities, where the practical skills of language teaching were often undervalued.

But in recent years just as the field of second language acquisition brought about a rethinking of our understanding of the nature of second language learning, the nature of teacher-development or “teacher-learning” as it is now referred to, has been subject to the same kind of scrutiny and theorizing. While traditional views of teacher-learning often viewed the teachers’ task as the application of theory to practice, more recent views see teacher-learning as both the acquisition of knowledge, as well as the theorization of practice, in other words, making visible the nature of practitioner knowledge and providing the means by which such knowledge can be elaborated, understood and reviewed. Transmission modes of teaching are replaced with various forms of dialogic and collaborative inquiry. Learning is seen to emerge through socialization into the professional thinking and practices of a community of practice.

## **CHANGES FROM THE OUTSIDE**

While the kinds of changes I have described above reflect the healthy state of our profession and the impact of influences from research, applied linguistics, curriculum theory, and teacher education, there are other sources of change that affect our work. These reflect the unique status of English in today’s world.

### ***Changes in the status of English***

When I entered this profession we tended to assume that teaching English was a politically neutral activity and that it would bring untold blessings to those who succeeded in learning it. English was regarded as the property of the English-speaking world, particularly Britain and the US. Native-speakers of the language, particularly those with blond hair and blue eyes, had special insights and superior knowledge about teaching it. And it was above all the vehicle for the expression of a rich and advanced culture or cultures, whose literary artifacts had universal value.

This picture has changed somewhat today. Now that English is the language of globalization, international communication, commerce and trade, the media and popular culture, different motivations for learning it come into play. English is no longer viewed as the property of the English-speaking world but is an international commodity sometimes referred to as *World English* or *English as an International Language*. The cultural values of Britain and the US are often seen as irrelevant to language teaching, except in situations where the learner has a pragmatic need for such information. The language teacher need no longer be an expert on British and American culture and a literature specialist as well. English is still promoted as a tool that will assist with educational and economic advancement but is viewed in many parts of the world as one that can be acquired without any of the cultural trappings that once went with it.

### ***Changed goals for learning English***

One of the implications I draw from the new status of English as an international language is a rethinking of what our goals should be in English teaching. If English is taught as a practical tool, to function as one part of the learner's overall communicative repertoire, traditional formulations of desired outcomes – targeting an advanced level of language learning that mimics the competency of the native speaker - may be unnecessary and is largely unattainable in most circumstances anyway. Rather, most learners in EFL contexts need to be equipped with a type of language proficiency that enables them to deal with both professional and real-life situations, that gives them a command of thinking and problem-solving skills in English that can be achieved with an upper-intermediate level of language proficiency. A different kind of proficiency in English is needed, one which will help employees to advance in international companies and improve their technical knowledge and skills. It also provides a foundation for what have been called “process skills” – those problem-solving and critical-thinking skills that are needed to cope with the rapidly changing environment of the workplace, one where English plays an increasingly important role. Although considerable skill in language use is required, native-speaker proficiency is neither an attainable, nor in most cases, a necessary goal, a fact that the developers of the Common European Framework, seemed to have missed.

### ***New Englishes***

In the past, the target for learning was assumed to be a native-speaker variety of English and it was the native speaker's culture, perceptions, and speech that were crucial in setting goals for English teaching. The native speaker had a

privileged status. Today local varieties of English such as Filipino English and Singapore English are firmly established, and even in contexts where English is a foreign language there is less of a pressure to turn foreign-language speakers of English (e.g. Koreans, Mexicans, or Germans) into mimics of native-speaker English, be it an American, British, or Australian variety. The extent to which a learner seeks to speak with a native-like accent and sets this as his or her goal, is a personal one. It is not necessary to try to eradicate the phonological influences of the mother tongue nor to seek to speak like a native speaker since the speaker's accent often serves as a valued marker of cultural identity.

### ***Off-shore English***

At the same time the notion of English as an international language also has implications for how native-speakers speak English. Those of us who use English daily as an international language need to develop the ability to use a type of English that makes use of high frequency vocabulary, that avoids colloquialisms, vague language, and obscure syntax. In Europe meetings of the European Union are increasingly carried on in English, since it is argued that English is the language that excludes the fewest people present. However it comes at a cost, since according to a recent report in the Economist, "native-English-speakers are notoriously hard for colleagues in Brussels to understand: they talk too fast and use obscure idioms".

So when dealing with global business, native speakers are often at a disadvantage when it comes to brokering deals in their mother-tongue. And some language schools are now offering courses in "offshore English" to help CEOs looking to clean up their language when working abroad. Offshore English (like Basic English of the 1930s) consists of 1500 or so of the most common English words and a syntax that is stripped of unnecessary complexity and vagueness. And in classes in offshore English, native speakers are taught to speak "core English", to avoid idioms, (e.g. to say "make every effort" instead of "pull out all the stops"), and to use latin-based words like "obtain" instead of those with Germanic roots such as "get".

### ***Organizational and management views of teaching***

In the last decade or so language teaching has also been influenced by concepts and practices from the corporate world. Schools are increasingly viewed as having similar characteristics to other kinds of complex organizations in terms of organizational activities and processes, as systems involving inputs, processes,



and outputs. Teaching is embedded within an organizational and administrative context and influenced by organizational constraints and processes.

This management-based or industrial view of education has brought into language teaching concepts and practices from the commercial world, with an emphasis on planning, efficiency, communication processes, targets and standards, staff development, learning outcomes and competencies, quality assurance, strategic planning, performance appraisal, and best practice. We have thus seen a movement away from an obsession with pedagogical processes to a focus on organizational systems and processes and their contribution to successful language programs.

### ***Learning moves beyond the classroom***

In the not too distant past, teaching was viewed rather narrowly as a self-contained activity that didn't need to look much beyond itself. Improvements in teaching would come about through fine-tuning methods, course design, materials and tests. And for years we focussed particularly on methods as the driving force of teaching and learning.

But it has taken us a while to realize that while good teaching is no less important than it ever was, today's learners are not as dependent on classroom-based learning and teaching as they used to be. Have you ever wondered why young people in the northern European countries such as Sweden and Finland speak English so well when they leave school, and why students in countries like Spain, Italy, Korea and Japan of the same age have such difficulties with English? It isn't because the teaching is much better in some parts of Europe. Talk to young people from Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Holland and they typically tell you that they learned most of their English from the media, from watching TV programs and movies in English. But the important fact about the media in these countries is that foreign movies are not usually dubbed: subtitles in the mother tongue are provided, giving students a bilingual mode of developing their comprehension and to some extent, their oral skills, something which doesn't happen in those countries like Spain, Italy and Japan, where English learning is much less successful. Movies and other English-language based visual media there are always dubbed and students go through the educational system rarely encountering a word of English outside of their English lessons.

And if this source of informal out of school language learning is so effective, imagine how much more effective learning is becoming when students encounter a major part of their exposure to English not in classrooms but in chat rooms, face books, blogs, e-mails, and the countless other sources of real English students can access today. And this is why students in many countries today are demanding that their teachers and course books prepare them for the kinds of English they encounter outside of the classroom, in the media and the internet and elsewhere. So the challenge for us is how to make the most of the new opportunities that the internet, new technology, the media, and blended learning offer.

### ***The demand for accountability***

The scope of English teaching world-wide has also created a demand for greater accountability in language teaching practices. Accountability seeks to answer such questions as “What constitutes a quality English language program in terms of its curriculum, the teaching methods that it gives rise to, and the kinds of teachers that the program depends upon? What knowledge, skills and competencies do the teachers in such programs need?” These kinds of questions are very difficult to answer since there are no widely-accepted definitions of concepts of “quality” in language teaching and likewise there is no internationally recognized specification of English language teacher competencies, though local specifications of essential teacher competencies have been produced in many countries and by a number of professional organizations. The current approach of course to the issue of accountability is through the identification of standards for language programs and through specification of indicators of best practice for language schools. At the same time traditional English language syllabuses at state and national level are increasingly being replaced by banks of competencies that spell out the details of what students are expected to learn and teachers expected to teach, as we find in the “can do” statements of the Common European Framework. This has been criticized as a reductionist approach to educational planning, and is another dimension to the industrialization of language teaching that I referred to earlier.

## **LOOKING FORWARD**

When we attend conferences like these we often leave with a sense of excitement, energized by new understandings of the field and keen to apply some of what we have learned to our own teaching contexts. The determination to do

the best for their students and to continually fine tune their teaching in order to bring about better levels of learning in their learners are common characteristics of English teachers world wide. Most are always willing to take on board new ideas and to look for opportunities to bring about change.

Some observers of the status of English language teaching today would like to bypass the role of our profession in shaping educational change and attribute pressure from outside the profession as the engine that is driving the major changes that are occurring in language teaching in many parts of the world. They point to the emergence of a quasi- industrial, corporate, or political response to what is sometimes termed called “the English problem”. And it is true that sometimes when planners are looking for solutions to the language teaching problem, they don’t turn always to us for guidance. So, for example, when the Malaysian government recently decided that Malaysia’s economic future as a regional centre was in decline and that better English language proficiency on the part of school leavers was needed, they decided to switch to using English for the teaching of math and science, starting from primary school. They didn’t ask the ESL profession to come up with a solution to the problem but announced the policy change first. The language teaching profession then had to respond with programs to support the change. Similarly in Hong Kong when educational planners were concerned that high school leavers’ poor listening skills would be a handicap when they entered English-medium universities, they didn’t approach specialists in the teaching of listening, for suggestions. They simply increased the weighting given to listening comprehension in the school leaving examinations, leaving the washback effect to take care of the rest.

Competency-based instruction provides another example. In many countries governments have adopted a competency-based framework across the curriculum, because it is the favoured model for the provision of vocation and technical training world-wide, because it provides a useful framework for planning and assessment, and so, it is argued, it should be used for English courses as well. In countries like Australia, this meant that language programs for immigrants and new arrivals, which had been planned around a learner-centred framework to much acclaim from the language teaching profession in the 1980s, had to be redesigned around a competency framework in the late 1990s in response to government policy. Teachers and schools then had to rethink their approaches to teaching and assessment.

On the other hand, optimists like myself like to point out that while we may feel we have little control over some of the events that create our professional challenges, the TESOL profession itself IS making a difference, indeed, it is making a huge contribution to helping our learners achieve their goals. Let me conclude by citing just a few examples.

### ***Raising the language proficiency of non-native English teachers***

Most of the world's English teachers are non-native speakers of English, and their proficiency level in English is an important factor in their competence as language teachers. Apart from the contribution to teaching skills that English language proficiency makes, research has also shown that an English teacher's confidence is also dependent upon his or her own level of language proficiency, so a teacher who perceives herself to be weak in English will have reduced confidence in her teaching ability and an inadequate sense of professional legitimacy. This may be why research into what non-native English teachers consider to be their most pressing needs for professional development generally rank very highly the need for further language training.

One solution is to ignore the problem and bring in "native speakers" to help the teacher, as happens in Japan and Korea, where untrained graduates in any subject area can work in high schools alongside the national teachers to assist with the conversation classes. I haven't seen any evidence of the long term success of this strategy. And it does nothing to foster improvement in the English language proficiency of the national teachers.

A more successful strategy in many countries however has been to invest in raising the English proficiency levels of English teachers, either through offering teachers chances to take courses like the Cambridge First Certificate or through hiring teachers with better levels of English. This factor alone is having a major impact on standards of English teaching in many parts of the world. In the past in countries like Mexico and in many parts of south America, to learn English from teachers with a good command of English, students had to enrol in private institutes, taking extra courses after school. And so a parallel educational system developed to provide such courses. Nowadays however, the standard of English teaching available in public schools is much higher, resulting in declining numbers of students feeling the need for extra English classes in private institutes.

### ***Newer standards for textbooks and learning resources***

Another response to the expanding demand for English courses has been a dramatic expansion in both the scope and quality of textbooks and other teaching resources. I see this as reflecting the sophisticated levels of knowledge, professional training, and expectations of today's language teaching professionals as well as in the higher standards demanded by their students. Whereas in the past textbooks tended to be based on academic fashions, to reflect the culture and methodology of origin, to be geared mainly to native-speaker teachers, to contain extensive use of both artificial texts and tasks, and to provide models of standard or prestige native-speaker English, teachers today demand much more of textbooks. And as a result of pressure from teachers and students, current textbooks provide a much richer resource for students and learners, have a stronger focus on international and indigenous cultures, expose students to examples of authentic world Englishes, provide support for both trained and novice teachers as well as those for whom English is not a native language, and draw on multimedia and the internet as sources for classroom as well as independent learning. And the fact that English teachers are achieving higher levels of attainment in their learners is evidenced by the fact that in many countries, demand for low level materials is declining, while there is an expanding demand for intermediate and upper-intermediate textbooks and resources.

### ***Raising the professional standards required of English teachers***

Another message that the profession has communicated to the market has been the need to raise the professional standards of English teachers. English language teaching today is seen as a career in a field of educational specialization, it requires a specialized knowledge base obtained through both academic study and practical experience, and it is a field of work where membership is based on entry requirements and standards. The professionalism of English teaching is seen in the growth industry devoted to providing language teachers with professional training and qualifications, in continuous attempts to develop standards for English language teaching and for English language teachers, to the proliferation of professional journals and teacher magazines, conferences and professional organizations, and to the expanded knowledge base required of English teachers.

The focus on professionalism may mean different things in different places. In some it may mean acquiring new qualifications. The Mexican Ministry of education for example is currently language teacher-education course for some 150,000 English teachers working in the State sector. When in the Sultanate of

Oman, a decision was made to start teaching English at primary school, a program was set in place in conjunction with Leeds university, to provide every primary school English teacher in the country with a B.Ed TESOL degree. For teachers new to the profession there are now a wide range of possibilities for teachers to pursue professional development. And teachers don't need much encouragement to avail themselves of the opportunity. In some countries I have visited recently, the demand for the TKT test far exceeds the number of places available on TKT courses. Countries differ of course in the support they provide for professional development. Few countries can probably match Singapore, however, where teachers can take up to 100 hours of professional development courses a year.

There has also been a growth in a more personal approach to professionalism, in which teachers engage in reflection on their own values, beliefs, and practices. The current literature on professional development for language teachers promotes a wide variety of procedures through which teachers can engage in critical and reflective review of their own practices , e.g. through self-monitoring, analysing critical incidents, teacher support groups, book study groups, and action research.

***And so...***

Despite the pressures of the market place and the workplace, our profession is well geared to respond to the kinds of changes I have referred to here. Today's English teachers are better prepared than ever before, the teaching resources available to us are providing new environments for teaching that were not available to us just a few years ago, and the professional support provided through our schools and professional organizations enables us to learn from participation in a worldwide community of teachers. And technology is offering exciting new opportunities for teacher development too. Technology is providing new dimensions to campus-based teaching (for example using internet-based resources) as well as for distance teaching through on-line learning. These new forms of delivery allow for the development of teacher-networks that cross regional and national boundaries, establishing globalized communities of teachers who can bring their own cultural, social, professional and personal experiences into the teacher learning process.

These are good times to be an English teacher or a teacher educator. I wish I could have the opportunity to do it all again, but starting from where we are now rather than from the state of the profession when I first entered it. At conferences like these we are reminded of the dynamic nature of our profession, a profession that is engaged in ongoing reinvention as it seeks to respond to the needs of today's teachers and learners. And while my perspective has been somewhat backward-focussed, reflecting on the kinds of changes that I have witnessed during my career, looking forward I can only imagine that the pace of change will be much faster and somewhat less predictable. But that is going to be another story. Thank you for listening to my story. And I look forward to hearing your stories in the years ahead.

