

Humanistic Thinking and its Influence on Main-Stream EFL

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The dissemination of ideas and their subsequent practical application is a very difficult area to describe with clarity and confidence as any one writer knows so little of what is going on, especially as "main stream EFL" is a worldwide phenomenon. The best I can do is to offer you a dabs and dabs picture which will mainly focus on Western Europe, where I happen to work.

Creation of a state of mind

Colleagues in my own organisation, Pilgrims, first met the ideas of Curran, Gattegno and Stevick in the summer of 1977. Some people immediately felt sympathy and excitement - others resisted and others were relatively indifferent. Over the next two summers (this part of Pilgrims is summer only) the ideas seeped further into people's thinking and practical work: several of us tried CLL work with beginners and you could see teachers vying with each other for boxes of rods. These practical, classroom attempts were important in themselves but they were more important in creating a new state of mind, one in which we began to think about students differently.

In 1979, Lou Spaventa, a Brattleboro graduate who had been the main transmission wire for much of this thinking, proposed that we scrap our diagnostic test at the start of the summer program and replace it with a set of get-to-know-each-other exercises followed by a find-your-own-level bazaar. In the bazaar students moved round a hall and tried to decide which level class they felt they should join. There were labels round the walls: **Very advanced, advanced, upper intermediate** etc, and under each label stood the respective class teacher. The students' task was to talk to the class teacher and to each of the other people who felt they might belong to that given level. Students were also encouraged to visit the groups that had formed above and below the one they had initially chosen.

We discovered that the level bazaar was no more inefficient in placing students in class than the old diagnostic test but that it was a hundred times more dynamic and that it spelled out a clear message to the students: the course was theirs, they were the protagonists, the decisions were theirs. For some students and teachers a negative by-product of the bazaar was a feeling of insecurity, lack of authority, anxiety.

For a group of twenty teachers to move from using a 'safe', patemchitic, technical instrument, like a diagnostic test, which bored the students but which they accepted as a fact of academic life, to using a much more risky, student-centred procedure speaks of a genuinely new collective state of mind in the staffroom. The important thing that contact with the Curran, Gattegno and Stevick's ideas and practices had brought us was a genuine openness to student-centred ways of behaving.

Over the ten years since 1979 maybe two thirds of our summer program class placement has been done by the bazaar method and one third by a variety of placement tests.

The point I am trying to make is that the influence of the humanistic originators is not to be judged simply by the number of teachers who are now "pure" Silent Way or CLL teachers.

Gattegno Stands Behind Grammar Games

Had I not met the thinking of Gattegno I would certainly not have written **Grammar Games**, a teacher's resource book which has sold over thirty thousand copies in the last five years. From Silent Way I learnt the idea that language mistakes are hypotheses, trials, stepping stones to firm, skilled use of language. I had been trained in the Skinnerian tradition that sees mistakes as dangers to be suppressed and avoided at all costs. Gattegno gave me permission to ask students to look carefully at their mistakes, to wonder about them, to try to put them right themselves. His simple message was: "don't correct your students' mistakes - help them focus sharply enough to do it themselves - that way they may really learn". Nearly all the exercises in the book follow this Gattegno principle.

Without Gattegno's thought I could never have proposed an activity like **Grammar Auction**, in which students are asked to decide on the correctness or otherwise of sentences lifted from their written work. Each student pair are given a notional sum in dollars that they can spend at a "sentence" auction. Their aim is to only buy correct sentences. The teacher tries to sell off all the sentences good and bad. Sometimes the whole group will enthusiastically bid for a mistaken sentence! The feeling of being cheated when they discover they were wrong can be very strong.

This exercise draws on Silent Way thinking for its language learning theory and is now used in many different corners of the globe by teachers who have never worked with the full Silent Way apparatus of sound charts, word charts and rods. Powerful, generative pedagogical insights will never be limited to the dress they first appear in.

The Flow of Water

I would compare the spread of the ideas that Stevick has eloquently championed to the way water irrigates a land area. Some areas of the plain are really ready for the water.

An example of a group who have made humanistic thinking part of their normal teaching life are the **Studia** teachers in Polish Universities. These folk teach English to other faculty members and so, in a way, student centredness is simply a way of respecting colleagues. The English teachers have been so successful that many of their teaching techniques are being used by other subject lecturers in their own disciplines: engineering students suddenly find themselves doing a jigsaw reading exercise during a lecture on hydrodynamics!

When private EFL schools began to spring up in Hungary in the early 80's the teachers in them got together to find out all they could about humanistic teaching. I have met Hungarian colleagues who know Alan Maley's books better than he does himself!

The team who run in-service training in the Canton of Geneva in Switzerland have been strongly influenced by Moskovitz and other work drawn from the therapies. Over the past ten years they have been making this thinking easily available to EFL teachers via materials packages and workshops. I have personal evidence that some teachers have found the ideas work well with their teenage classes.

There are groups in main-stream EFL all over Europe who have been powerfully influenced by humanistic thinking but the flow of the irrigation water is patchy and hard to predict - there are many central people in the European educational establishments who do their damnest to keep their patches clear of such subversive thinking.

The Teachers' Resource Book Phenomenon

In the early seventies Cambridge University Press created a new genre of EFL writing, the teacher's resource book: a collection of practical ideas that were classroom-ready. The mainstay writers in those early days were Alan Duff and Alan Maley, with books like **Drama Techniques, Variations on a Theme, Sounds Intriguing**. The Cambridge list has been a major channel for the dissemination of humanistic thinking at an extraordinarily practical and accessible level. The proof of the success of such books is that they just won't die. Teachers keep on buying them and in 1986 Oxford University Press started a major series of their own, edited by Maley. In Spring 1990 Longman, the giant of UK EFL publishing, weighed in with the first five titles of their own resource book list, in collaboration with Pilgrims.

These books are vitally important in their own right in that they slake the thirst for genuine, practical methodological help that teachers rarely get from their training in university EFL and Linguistic departments. The resource books are also central as an idea source for the next generation of course books. An example of this process would be the way the Cambridge English Course came into being. Its authors, Michael Swan and Catherine Walters, were both working in Paris in the late seventies at a time when Alan Maley was running a major series of humanistic seminars and workshops at the British Council there. Those rich workshops and the books that went with them provided the humus out of which CEC grew.

Untouched Areas

The world is an enormous place and it is safe to say that the vast majority of EFL teachers have never heard of Stevick or any of the other 'internationally well-known' EFL writers. They know their local/national coursebook and that is it.

There are areas of the EFL world you might expect to have access to plenty of ideas but where nothing of interest is happening. Most science students taking service English courses at Malaysian universities are offered an unremitting diet of dreary gap-filling and substitution exercises. It is as if the last twenty years in EFL methodology had never happened. The University of Malay and one or two other institutions are notable exceptions to these strictures. I discovered that the various teachers resource books produced in the US and UK were virtually unavailable in Kuala Lumpur, as of May 1989. Extraordinary.

Irrigation water will flow in unexpected directions and reach places you would never have imagined. It will also fail to produce any results in place you might think were natural oases for it. The movement of ideas is truly mysterious.