

One man's view of European EFL in the 1970's

Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, UK

mario@pilgrims.co.uk

Humans had recently landed on the moon and the Vietnamese were successfully driving the US invaders from their lands, the student unrest of 1968 was past and in UK we were still getting over the mild surprise of our lukewarm entry into the European Union.

My teaching at this time was still deeply influenced by the behaviourist text books of Geoffroy Boughton , Success with English and Robert O'Neill's Kernels Intermediate. In the early 70's my view was that if I taught these excellent coursebooks loyally, my students would set sail happily across the ocean of English.

And then some odd, disturbing, brilliant things began to happen: Adrian du Plessis at CUP launched his new EFL list and unleashed the new, human-centred ideas of Alan Duff and Alan Maley on the world of UK EFL. Suddenly, in place of the lock-step behaviourism of Boughton, Alexander and O'Neill, we had brilliant , person-sensitive resource books like Maley and Duff's Mind Matters, The Mind's Eye, Drama Techniques and Sounds Intriguing. Taken together, these books offered me a totally new way of relating to my students. Keywords like explanation, presentation, drilling, transfer, gave way to a new set of terms: unconditional positive regard (Rogers), caring and sharing ,(Moskowitz), creativity, student autonomy etc....

Parallel to these developments in UK , the French EFL community produced a brilliant drama-based coursebook All's Well, (Sagot and Dickinson) which was such a new approach that the publisher would throw in a short teacher training course each

time they sold the title to a large school.

In Germany the year 1978 saw Bernard Dufeu take the first steps in creating Language Psychodramaturgy, which was not fully described for EFL teachers until the publication of his Teaching Myself by OUP in 1994.

The 1970's was the decade in which a handful of far sighted authors and publishers planted the seeds of the humanistic movement in language teaching. These years saw the development of teacher training centres like International House, Hastings and Pilgrims, where keen teachers could go and learn humanistic techniques and evaluate humanistic beliefs in a fully practical way. (this kind of work had already begun in the US in the late 50's and 60's of the last century at SIT in Brattleboro, Vermont.)

The 1970's also held the seeds for future developments in EFL of much less healthy kind. The Council of Europe published van Eck's Threshold Level and the publishers for a time fell into love with the idea of re-organising language learning around "notions" and "functions". These weak ideas bit the dust and got forgotten in the 80's., but not before some publishers had made money out of them.

The Council of Europe team, led by John Trim, worked on and laid the basis for what is now known as the Common European Framework, which has wasted much teacher thinking time over the past decade and is set to waste plenty more.

And the 70's beyond Europe?

China ran the biggest re-training enterprise of the 20th century, gradually teaching English to some hundreds of thousands of teachers of Russian who now had to teach English, following the 1960's split between Peking and Moscow.

In Japan EFL students learnt their lessons by heart and failed to learn spoken English

in much the same way as still happens today, 30 year on. As today, they flocked to the crammer schools to catch up on what they failed to learn in their ritualised school lessons. Grammar-translation of the old sort failed then as it fails now. In Brazil the children of the rich learnt English fast and well in top class private schools while the majority of children left state education not knowing or speaking a word.

The reason for citing these East Asian and S American examples is simply to point up the obvious fact that we in Europe lived a very different 1970's decade from that experienced in world EFL and that since EFL is a world utility we cannot afford to think with European blinkers on.