

The E.F.L. PATCH WORK : 1984

by Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, Canterbury

When John Dougill, the new editor of the Newsletter, asked me to write this piece he said he wanted one person's view of the "state of the art" in late 1984. I spent ten minutes telling him that I had much too much detailed and contradictory information about what is going on in EFL, even within Western Europe, to be able to produce any form of valid generalisation.

He insisted that I write something, so what follows sets out why I feel that any attempt at general overview can only be undertaken by people who are a lot less exposed to what is happening on the ground than I am. All I can do is to share a number of brief glimpses of things that I have seen going on and leave you make your own synthesis or to wisely refuse to make one.

The new and the old warring within one person

I was recently allowed to watch classes given by a friend in Southern Italy. The first two groups were 15 year-old lower intermediates working with Abbs' Strategies series. The classes were lively and there was much talking in English. The listening work done by this class had been so successful that though my friend normally dropped her initial 'h's more than half her students did not! The atmosphere in the room was warm and spontaneous.

At the end of the morning I watched a class of 17-18 year olds suffering an 'interrogazione letteraria'. Three students lined up in front of the teacher's desk with hands crossed over their sexes and gave stilted, memorised answers to my friend's stilted questions about Joyce's life and about a two page scene from the beginning of Finnegan's Wake. This horror went on for half an hour. The rest of the class fidgeted docilely and fled the room mentally.

My friend was very surprised that I had found the morning in her three classes a schizo experience. She somehow spanned the Abbs induced ethos and the "interrogation" induced state and failed to see that they were in start opposition to each other on every level. In one person in one town in Southern Italy I found Abbs' vision co-inhabiting with the pedagogy of the turn of the century, of the last century!

Give us a textbook!

For a good part of the last ten years I have battled against teachers' over-dependence on their textbooks. In my own teaching in Canterbury I no longer have time for the lock-steppery of textbooks that inevitably ignore the changing mood and development of the group.

This view took a bashing when I went to Portugal to work with teachers preparing students for their final secondary school exams. The Ministry there prescribes ten or so overall themes that the work in this final year must tackle. The themes are very general: Migration/Family life etc..... The teachers, faced with this immense

freedom saw it as a desert. The one thing they wanted from the training course was a series of texts to clothe the themes. They also wanted to be told what to do with the texts. Given immense pedagogical freedom they were screaming for texts, guidelines, and defining restrictions.

A left look at 'Life and Institutions'

In North Germany (the Bremen area) there is a strong movement towards filling the language classes at upper secondary level with political awareness content. I was shown the material for an exciting series of lessons exploring apartheid in South Africa in an extremely personalised way. The teacher involved told me that some of the girls in her class had been moved to tears in the six unit of this material. Other teachers in the same group have worked out projects on the peace movement, nuclear war and other currently "hot" issues. Most language teachers feel insecure about apparently 'only' teaching a how and a number of teachers in Germany have decided to teach a political/cultural what.

Humanistic Teaching in China

As China opens up to outside influence a whole range of EFLers from the US, UK and Australia start teaching their language according to their current technical beliefs. My colleague, John Morgan, found that his students in Fuchou were very ready to accept person-centred work. In one exercise he showed them a scar on his body and told the story of how he had acquired it. The student's account (the mistakes have now been corrected) :

When I was a little girl, I always helped my mother do homework. One day my mother told me to feed chicken. I went to feed my chicken. I found I lost a chicken. I looked for it everywhere. I went for it quickly. The floor was very slick, but I didn't pay any attention to it and went by. Suddenly, I fell down. Some broken glass cut my hand. The blood had frightened me. I had to go to the surgery. The doctor put some medicine on my hand. The bleeding stop. When I came home my mother asked me how I was feeling. I said it was a little painful. My mother said I must take care of everything when I was doing something. Now I have a scar on my hand. Because of this scar I can remember what my mother told me. (20 year old student in Fuchou, S.E. China).

Teachers who don't speak the language they teach

One of the main problems about EFL if you compare it to Français Langue Etrangère or to Deutsch als Fremdsprache is that such floods of people all round the world are forced to learn it. There are simply not enough teachers of English who know the language to go around. A great number of Mexican school teachers of English would, in European terms, be classed as elementary or lower intermediate users of the language. Things are not helped by classes in Mexico ranging from 40-70.

Reagan and Lado

If Reagan has dominated economic, political and military life in Latin America over the last four years it is equally sure that Lado has dominated much of language teaching thinking in the continent over the last 20. This was certainly true of Chile when I worked there in the early seventies and in the November 1984 EFL Gazette a Nicaraguan had this to say about the teaching of English since the democratisation of the country!

"Methodology is dominated by American conceptions and most of the country's university lecturers have learnt English using American methods. The book I used in university was a photocopy of an American version of Living English Structures by Stannard Allen." The article goes on to say that it has proved very hard to move English teachers on from Lado and Fries stimulus-response exercises, even though they are living in a society where the mother tongue literacy campaigns have been run along Freire lines, that is to say intensely meaning and communication focussed work.

All's Well in Bankstown

In 1982 I spent a day watching Vietnamese, Poles, Macedonians and Lebanese working on their English in a migrant reception centre in Bankstown, Sydney. These adults had ten weeks in which to learn enough English to cope with life in Australia. Most of the day was spent doing physical and word-dance exercises aimed at helping them internalise the stress, rhythm and intonation of English. They were using the All's Well course devised in Paris by Sagot and marketed by Didier. While well known in Australia and much of Western Europe EFLers in UK are mostly unaware of it.

An appeal against overviews

John, do you now understand why I jibbed at your request to write a "state of the art" overview of World EFL? The task is only possible if one knows very little about what is going on. In UK we are marvellously ignorant of what goes on elsewhere - we are very badly placed to pontificate about trends. How much do I know about the problem-solving based work of Prabha in India and how much do the applied linguists in Lancaster know about the work of Bernard Dufeu, marrying psychodrama techniques and language learning, that has been well documented in Le Français dans le Monde recently. The more you find out about what is actually going on world|wide in EFL the less you feel like vapid generalising.



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to Durgill