## **GRASSROOTS ACTION TO IMPROVE ESL PROGRAMS<sup>1</sup>**

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#### 1 Introduction

Most second language (SL) educators attempt to deliver good teaching partly by teaching well in the present, and partly by planning for better teaching in the future. Taking steps to improve SL teaching may involve working on the knowledge base for teaching, or it can involve working with the social situation of teaching. In this paper I will discuss the process of improving teaching from a social standpoint. Despite the picture commonly presented of teaching, as being done by a teacher alone with a group of students, it does not exist in isolation. As teachers, we operate within a social setting and in an administrative/bureaucratic milieu, and other members of the social network in which we are enmeshed have different goals and objectives to our own. First, the students themselves may not have goals directly congruent with our own—they may not actually be in our classes to learn English, but rather for social reasons (to make friends, for example), or because attendance is mandatory. However, this does not necessarily prevent teaching from continuing, if only because students are less powerful than teachers in most school systems. Second, the nature of the ESL business, pre-professional as it often is, means that many of our fellow teachers do not have a professional attitude, and do not have adequate training. It may be possible to deal with them through a process of education, particularly if these individuals are our equals within the system in terms of power. On the other hand, there are those

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Mike Long for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> We should recognize that the term "professional" is not uniformly desirable. On the one hand it carries implications of service, and of practitioner self-regulation. On the other it reflects the independence of practitioner from client and from employer characteristic of the legal and medical professions, which is built on the collective exercise of power and the witholding of information from the ordinary individual (Ginsburg, 1988).

in the network who not only have different goals to us, but also have either as much or more power than us—administrators—and these people may present the more potentially serious problems. In ESL programs, two main categories of administrator may be identified. Type one is the administrator who has been imposed on a program from above, and who may have no prior connection with ESL, or even with teaching. Type two is the administrator who has come up from the ranks, possibly a particularly effective teacher (or at least one who is long-lasting in the given program) and is now responsible for the program, either alone, or directly to an administrator of the first type. We should recognize that there is no special reason why those who do not teach, should have the same goals as teachers, and this applies most obviously to the first category of administrator. They have different responsibilities, interact with different colleagues, face different pressures, and have different fears (Hannaway & Sproul, 1978-79, cited in Pitner, 1987—but cf. Pennington, 1983, for a slightly different perspective). As noted by Guthrie & Reed (1986, p. 171),

decisions of the classic bureaucrat will be made in the interests of the organization, while decisions of the idealized professional will reflect the best interest of the client or norms of the profession.

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And of course, at least in private schools, the interests of the organization are making a profit. However, the type two administrator may soon become similar to the first type of administrator, because of the network of differing contacts and pressures resocializes him/her. In addition, as Denison & Shelton (1987, p. 16) observe,

the tradition of promoting classroom practitioners to managerial positions poses its own problems. Promotion relies less on potential to manage than on success as a teacher... there is no certainty that a successful teacher will prove effective in school management. Skills relating to the organisation of [students'] learning or classroom management are quite specific. It would be unreasonable to expect teachers who spend several years developing them to evolve simultaneously a range of more managerially useful competencies.

Finally, even if program administrators were trained for their job

(unlikely, if Denison & Shelton's "tradition" is still widespread) there is no guarantee that administrative decisions are made rationally—according to one study, at least 60% of an administrator's day is spent in brief verbal encounters of a minute or two with individuals while dashing from one meeting to another (Gronn, 1983), and administrators, like other executives are prone to settle for whatever "satisfices ... a course of action that is satisfactory or 'good enough'" (Simon, 1957, p. xxv). A full description of an educational administrator's workpatterns is provided by Pitner (1987, p. 56): it is characterized by

a low degree of self-initiated tasks
many activities of short duration
discontinuity caused by interruptions
the superseding of prior plans by the needs of others in the organization
face-to-face verbal contacts with one other person
variability of tasks
an extensive network of individuals and groups both internal and external
to the school districts
a hectic and unpredictable flow of work
numerous inconsequential decisions
few attempts at written communication
events occuring in or near the administrator's office
interactions predominantly with subordinates
the preference for problems and information that are immediate.

Most teachers want to see our programs improve, and so generally seek an element of change over time. Given this depiction of the administrator's circumstances, perhaps it is not surprising that teachers often feel the administrative/bureaucratic system in which they operate is moving in a different direction to that which they would like. Accordingly, this paper primarily concerns areas in the average ESL program where individual ESL teachers' should place their efforts to result in the improvement of the program and in their own professional circumstances. Prior to dealing with this, however, I want to allow for the fact that there are some administrators who are exceptionally sensitive to teachers concerns, and list some areas which need

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attention in most programs. Perhaps in the most teacher-oriented programs change in these areas can be initiated through teacher input to administrative channels.

## 2 Non-grassroots level targets

A first obvious set of areas for professional concern in any program are the regular aspects of program implementation. Relatively straightforward administrative changes with regard to, for example, needs analyses, placement tests, in-house materials creation, and availability of resources of all kinds can result in considerable improvements in any given ESL program, though such matters usually are not in the control of the regular teacher at the "grassroots" of the program. They come within the domain of lead teachers, at the least, and more usually are under the direct control of the administration.

A second important group are administrative/managerial responsibilities which have been directely implicated in program improvement. A list suggested on the basis on public school research includes the following primarily administrative responsibilities:

direct discretionary funds to instructional efforts control scheduling of staff meetings select staff for committees publicly reward teachers associated with improved programmatic efforts selectively protect teachers from outsiders and regulations demonstrate positive attitude towards the program control flow of information inside and outside school limit competition between program efforts represent school interests to district administrators promote instructional projects outside the school (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan & Lee, 1982, p. 34)

Assuming, as the relevant research suggests, attention to these concerns in particular characterizes the efficient, innovative educational administrator, teachers might in some cases be able, indirectly, to positively influence administrators' efforts in these areas.

In the management science approach to good educational program

administration, competent administrators manage by setting objectives, and then delegate authority on the understanding that subordinates will meet specific targets: "by carefully delegating responsibility, adroit administrators can actually increase their control over outcomes" (Deal & Celotti, 1977, p. 23). Increased attention to such targets could in some circumstances improve the running of a program, assuming the objectives to be met were desirable. However, no matter how well-intentioned an ESL program administrator is, goals cannot be achieved if they are not communicated, nor if they are beyond the efforts of a single individual who does not, first, delegate and second, monitor progress towards those goals. Communication and implementation monitoring is impeded by the loose coupling of educational systems (Deal & Celotti, 1977) which permits administrators to lose connection with their base and can also easily prevent targeted objectives from being realised. Changes in other areas which can also be very beneficial to a program's professional quality might cover the handling of contracts and the revision of job descriptions but again, it is hard for the average teacher to push for these.

In the absence of coherent managerial and administrative efforts to improve a SL program, teachers must make their own contributions to upgrading the operation in which they participate.

#### 3 Grassroots targets

The main things the individual teacher can legitimately and practically push for which may have long term benefits, are any concerns which start with the immediate situation of teachers, which is often one of alienation.

#### 3.1 Alienation

Alienation concerns the relationship between people and their environment, when it is, at minimum, a relationship of undesirable separation. It also refers to a subjective, negative state of mind, of which an individual may or may not be aware (Geyer, 1980; Schacht, 1970). Educators who have been professionally trained and are working under circumstances where they cannot maintain professional standards and activity are alienated individuals. This state has negative outcomes, both practically and psychologically.

First, teachers' professional circumstances are all too often alienating, in a number or areas, at least four of which are easy to identify<sup>3</sup>. First, in many

schools, the curriculum is not designed by teachers, but mandated from above or determined by the need to deal with standardized tests. Since teachers' primary means for actually doing their job has thus been removed from their control, they can be said to be alienated (Gitlin, 1987).

Second, teachers are obliged to spend a great deal of time dealing with administrative matters, documenting the movement of students from one objective or class to another, filing reports and test scores, and so on. This is the result of a steady centralizing trend in education systems where accountability is an issue (e.g., the U.S. public schools). The "lowered teacher discretion and increased routinization" (Beneveniste, 1987, p. 9) is an aspect of deskilling. These activities do not constitute teaching, but rather "schooling". (See also Beneveniste, 1985.)

Third, interaction between teachers is very restricted often because of physical arrangements—the very buildings in which they work may not make this possible. Administrative structures (Nias, 1987) can also be a hindrance, and the most obvious reason is simply tight scheduling. It has been pointed out (Gitlin, 1987) that elementary teachers often do not have preparation periods. Secondary teachers may be a little better off, but basically teacher interaction on professional matters usually has to come out of personal time or the little time allocated for the essential task of preparation. This has been referred to as a "deafening silence" which teachers suffer because of "their subordinate status, and because of their isolation within the cellular structure of schooling" (Edelfelt, 1989, p. 223, and see also Lortie, 1975). In addition, since in almost all circumstances resources are limited, teachers soon end up competing with each other for them, or at least taking measures which inhibit the sharing of both resources and knowledge.

Finally, again as a product of time pressures, large classes, and resource lacks, the teacher-student relationship, which should be at the heart of teaching is threatened and weakened (Gitlin, 1987).4

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Private language schools differ from public schools, but not so much that opinion and research on professionalism, teacher alienation and the like in public schools is completely ungeneralizable to the free-standing SL program. In the relative absence of evidence on the issues discussed here which is based directly on investigation of SL teaching programs, it is assumed that findings based on public schools are broadly applicable to private language institutions.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the much-touted 'School Based Management' may make things

Although it is obvious that major increases in resource allocation could alter many educational programs for the better, it is most unlikely that they will materialize. How then can the individual teacher improve matters? Obviously, we must concentrate our efforts on the most useful areas (cf. Baldridge, 1983), to engage in the antidote to alienation, which is empowerment. Such areas are discussed in the following sub-sections.

#### 3.2 Solutions to alienation

Since in educational systems, teachers are at the bottom of the power structure (with the exception of students) they cannot easily improve matters acting alone. But normal school structures isolate teachers and prevent them developing a sense of solidarity and the skills and shared experiences which facilitate "mutual aid" (Kropotkin, 1907). Also, teachers' most immediate concerns are often with making the classroom work. Accordingly, although many problems that teachers experience come from outside the classroom, it is probably desirable to begin with the classroom situation as a means of fostering teacher solidarity.

#### 3.2.1 Peer communication and observation

A good starting place is peer observation. This means that one teacher arranges with another to exchange class observations. The second perspective and the shared experience provided by the observations provides a basis for, as Edelfeldt puts it (1989, p. 223)

ways of beginning a dialogue with one another so as to penetrate the habitual taken-for-grantedness of ... classroom practice ... realizing that part of being a teacher involves grappling with and collectively confronting the contradictory demands of the educational system, rather than scapegoating disaffected or incapable teachers or acquiescing to bitter and unproducive self-recrimination.

(If it is not possible for a teacher to be in the class of another because of

worse, not better, for SLEP teachers. "The first rationale for moving to school based management is that schools should respond directly to parents' demands" (Marburger, 1985, p. 20). The parents of SLEP students (despite Lau v. Nichols) are generally the least likely group of parents to be capable of making their concerns felt, precisely because of their positions as SL speakers, and (often) immigrant status.

scheduling difficulties, the use of audiotape recordings of a class, jointly reviewed and discussed, may act as a substitute.) Yonemura (1982) provides a case-study, drawing on structured conversations between 23 pairs of experienced teachers who had observed each others' classes. She shows how these interactions enabled the participants to understand their own assumptions and (often unconscious) knowledge and philosophy of teaching, as a basis for future professional development through a process of learning from others and self-questioning.

Peer observation is not necessarily an immediate solution to problems, nor immediately easy to arrange, since it goes against the norms of teacher culture (cf. Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986). However, its presence typically characterizes those few schools where leadership and direction is being provided with regard to professional development (see Little, 1982, 1988 for detailed discussion). It is noteworth that in a survey of teachers' preferences for professional development activities (Holly & Holly, 1983, cited in Holly, 1989) peer observation was the most highly rated activity.

#### 3.2.2 Time

Although it is possible to arrange mutual observation without release time, time in general is a prerequisite for empowerment, and lack of time is a notable aspect of professional alienation and a preventor of professional development (Holly, 1989; Stenhouse, 1981). Since most administrative systems conceive of the teacher as one whose basic function is to be in direct contact with students, not as someone who should be engaged in lifelong professional development, most teachers are time-poor. Time, in the sense of release time or additional labor allocations, should be the number one demand made to administrators, and for which teacher representatives should press. In such circumstances it may be a good bargaining strategy to show authorities what can be achieved with time. Collaborative work on projects designed to improve materials and curriculum can be one obviously beneficial outcome of teachers' time outside the classroom.

#### 3.2.3 Curriculum committees

In many schools a committee will exist with some degree of responsibility for a sub-section of the curriculum (by 'skill' area, age range, and so on). A

particular concern of curriculum committees in SL schools or units is the selection of textbooks and development of materials. One possible first step for the professional emancipation of an ESL operation is to minimize the common addiction to published materials, which by their very nature can never be fully satisfactory for a given program or teaching situation (see e.g., Murphey, 1985). With the increasing availability of desktop publishing resources, in-house materials can be as attractive as mass produced materials, and have the added advantage of specifically targeting students' immediate needs and interests.

But more important for the present discussion, participation in curriculum development committees can result in feelings of professional growth, learning, and commitment to a shared product (e.g., Carlin, Purchall & Robinson, 1976, and Young, 1985, cited in Small & Young, 1988), and characterizes those schools most encouraging of professional development (Little, 1982). A group which produces a product which individuals cannot attain by themselves will be one which has high cohesion, which in turn is a desirable characteristic for future professional development activities. The mutually dependent nature of such a group should also foster improved attitudes of group members one for another (e.g., DeVries & Edwards, 1974, and studies reviewed in Sharan, 1980), and is an essential base for teacher development (Nias, 1987).

#### 3.2.4 Local workshops

By definition, teacher professionalism can not be developed outside of preservice training (the circumstances considered here) unless it is recognized that a professional attitude implies a committment to lifelong learning. This implies, at the very least, attendance at whatever faculty development activities occur. However, teachers' self-confidence is not served if they are presented with a sequence of visiting experts to conduct in-service workshops. The implication of such events is that teachers are ignorant and need to be told what to do by more highly skilled and educated individuals (who if possible should come from far off high-prestige organizations at great expense). Even if there is in actuality a shortage of local talent and expertise, if in addition the ideas involved are so complex that they can only be handled by a visiting expert, they are also sufficiently complicated that oral presentation and a one-shot workshop will be unable to do them justice.

Rather, the presentation of local workshops should be a natural

outgrowth of the activities of curriculum committees. If they have devoted time and energy to investigating an area of concern to the school, they should have the opportunity to present their findings to their colleagues. In doing so, of course, they act as models of professionalism to their peers.

Furthermore, not only are many aspects of teaching too complex for a single workshop to do them justice, the changing of teaching practices cannot usually be achieved by way of the amount of time usually available in an occasional workshop alone (Joyce & Showers, 1983; Shaver, Davis, & Helburn, 1978; Weiss, 1978; cited in Joyce & Showers, 1988; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977). New teaching procedures take time to learn, and teachers need support and feedback during their initial attempts. As a teacher engages in this process, s/he will benefit from "coaching". In coaching, a teacher who is attempting to implement a new strategy obtains support and feedback from fellow teachers, who provide assistance in five major areas: (1) companionship, (2) technical feedback, (3) analysis of decision-making, (4) information concerning the adaptation of the strategy to students, and (5) encouragement to practice (Joyce & Showers, 1982, p. 6). Joyce and Showers emphasize that coaching comes best from a teacher's peers, not from those in supervisory positions, and at least two studies demonstrate the superior acquisition of new teaching skills by coached as opposed to uncoached teachers (Showers, 1982, 1984).

While I have downplayed the desirability of visiting experts, I would not argue that it is necessary for all in-servicing to be in-school only. Once it has been accepted that on-site professional development is desirable, it is also possible for lead teachers to take on the role of 'resource linker'—a person whose responsibility is "finding materials, locating speakers... linking teachers who share common interests and needs" (Kent, 1985, p. 31). On that basis, and at the invitation of teachers, rather than a district office, can come the visiting expert, when absolutely necessary.

# 3.2.5 Professional networking and availability of relevant professional information

It may sometimes be questioned why a visiting speaker is brought in to talk to teachers when much of what the individual says s/he has already published. If teachers knew where to obtain the written versions of the presentation, they could read them at their leisure, discuss them over coffee with their colleagues, and deal with them in a measured, thorough, and critical

fashion. A visiting speaker who is recognized as "an authority" is also capable of making a presentation in a slick, charismatic style, from a podium and with administrative backing, all of which prevent the ideas being presented from getting the probing, critical consideration they deserve.

Nevertheless, the visiting expert should be retained for two reasons. First, access to information requires time and the setting up of networks, contacts, and correspondence. The visitor occasionally can short-circuit these problems. Second, the information teachers need may not be written in an immediately accessible form. However, if a position were created for a local teacher with appropriate resources allocated, in many cases the individual could set up the appropriate correspondence and make information available for far less than what the visiting expert cost. And as for the second point—there are ways of making technical or scientific writing and complex ideas in general more digestible, of which the study circle is the most obvious. 5 Some countries (e.g., Sweden, cf. Oliver, 1987) have pursued adult education for many decades through this means; the unfamiliarity of the concept in teacher education is the result of inadequate professional training which allows the misconception that professional learning stops at graduation. The final problem, of course, derives from the exploitative nature of many ESL jobs—insufficient time is provided for professional activities, or indeed any professional interaction, as discussed earlier. (For an optimistic preliminary report of this sort of professional development activity, see Plumb, 1988).

### 3.3 Action in the face of a lack of cooperation

The steps I have outlined above are arranged roughly in order of complexity and demand. They are intended to bring a body of teachers to a degree of understanding of what being a professional entails, and to the degree of unity necessary that requests for e.g., release time, will be considered favorably by the relevant authorities. Perhaps, if such a process took place slowly, given open-minded administrators, the legitimacy of the teachers' requests would be recognized, and they would also not be seen as a threat to the administrators' objectives. Profitability should be attainable through quality as well as through quantity, after all.

But this may be over-optimistic. One of the characteristics of ESL that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Some discussion of this possibility is to be found in Joyce, Hersh & McKibbin, 1983; and Burton, 1987, recognizes it as a possibility in the context of SL teacher education in Australia.

most attracts its practitioners is the opportunity it presents for a peripatetic existence. So in many cases the teachers will simply not stay around long enough for the procedures I have outlined to be worked through.

The other obvious reason why success may not follow is the absence of program standards to which administrators are obliged to conform. In the U.S, the TESOL Standards have no legal recognition and little professional recognition. Consequently, administrators of programs which do not maintain standards can ignore the requests of the best teachers with regard to program upgrading, and when those teachers leave their places can be filled with untrained teachers. Of course, program quality will decline, but students will not know because there is no certifying of program standards, either locally or nationally.

Official program recognition does exist in some countries (e.g., the U.K.—see "Better deal for teachers", 1989, and Japan—see "Seventy-seven Japanese-language schools", 1989), and local government restriction of ESL schools occurs in some locations ("MP Seeks Curb", 1989). It can be pushed for by local ESL professional organizations, though they in turn must be created first. Program recognition can be one arm of the nut-cracker.

The other arm is teacher organization. What if administrators are unresponsive to teachers' requests for professional treatment? Where there is little teacher mobility, and where there are accreditation standards which programs can be held to (Kreidler, 1983), then unionization is an option that should be considered (Tobash, 1983). In some countries (e.g., Japan, the U.S., and the U.K. at least), procedures for setting up a union are closely governed by law. Increasingly, ESL schools are taking advantage of them. In the U.S., the procedures for setting up a small bargaining unit for the ELI of the American University, Washington DC, have been documented (Shulman, 1982; DeLuca, 1982). In Greece, the British Council's ESL school at Thessaloniki has had to back down over the firing of some of its teachers because they were members of a teacher's union ("Greek Sackings Victory", 1987). And in Japan, prestigious ESL schools such as Nichibei Kaiwa Gakuin (International Education Center) have long had teacher unions, and more are being instituted, with the support of local government Labor Administration Offices. As one organizer of a Japanese ESL union puts it, "Starting a union is only for serious people... [who are] making a commitment to living and working in

Japan" ("Foreign English teachers", 1989, p. 1). It should be noted that such activities are only for the serious ESL professional, one who has a longterm committment to the profession in the host country, rather than the common ESL expatriate, who flits from country to country, extracting the maximum amount of dollars at the minimum amount of personal inconvenience.

#### 4 Conclusions

Although I have been able to buttress some elements of the process proposed here with empirical evidence of varying degrees of validity, it has not been documented as an entity. The steps of the process are arranged in a rough sequence of complexity, or of threat to administration, which is very much subjective. Furthermore, it may be that under certain circumstances, most effect will be obtained through placing efforts immediately in the development of a bargaining unit. Much will depend on the individual location of a given program, professionally and culturally. But the alternative to action is isolation, cynicism, stagnation, a failure to fulfill one's potential as a creative human being, and in very practical terms, poorer quality programs and less successful students. For the sake of their own self-development, and their self-respect as ESL professionals, teachers in less-than-adequate programs must be prepared to take action. In this paper I have tried to sketch some ways in which such action can most profitably be directed. Given the circumstances in which many of us find ourselves, such action is sorely needed, and long overdue.

Received November 29, 1989
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