

# TESOL at the University Level:

## A Global Concern

*Monika Kehoe*

In this age of speed and abbreviations, alphabetic contractions proliferate apace and often puzzle. The 1968 edition of the *Dictionary of Acronyms* astoundingly contains more than 50,000 entries. While many of these occur in military (MIRV), scientific (DDT), and social welfare (CARE) fields, they are now appearing more frequently in education. English second language teaching, which has received its greatest impetus since World War II, has its quota of initialisms to set apart the various applications of its special methodology. Among these TESOL, or *teaching English to speakers of other languages*, is probably the most all-embracing. It covers programs for working adults as well as those for children and for students in institutions of higher education. At the university level, several acronyms have been devised to describe the different kinds of programs, approaches and correspondingly different goals established for each.

### *EFL*

First of all, university English-second-language programs throughout the world respond, more or less, to the role of English in the society which the university serves. In some European countries (*e.g.* Italy or Spain), English may still be just a foreign language with a literature which appeals to the segment of society attending the university. Being able to read Shakespeare "in the original" carries a certain snob value and may even be soberly advertised by the department concerned as "the key to Anglo-Saxon

culture." The science department of a Latin-American university may, on the other hand, require a reading knowledge of English for what is somewhat euphemistically called "research" purposes. In either case, the emphasis is on reading comprehension and the courses are likely to be conducted in what we may call the conventional way, as foreign languages have traditionally been taught in North America. This kind of program is often referred to as *EFL* or *English-as-a-foreign-language* to distinguish it from *ESL* or *English-as-a-second-language*.

### *ELWC*

In developing countries of Africa or Asia (*e.g.* Ethiopia or Korea), where English is not an official language but rather a necessary medium of contact with the outside world, university programs are prone to imitate British or American curriculum models and, as a result, offer courses in English literature to students with a meagre knowledge of the language and only a superficial acquaintance with Western or, as they call it, "European," culture. Unfortunately, these literature courses tend to favor the more esoteric poets such as William Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins and T. S. Eliot, or prose writers like James Joyce — the more esoteric the better. Asian and African students find these literary figures difficult to understand against the Western cowboy or murder-mystery backgrounds and behavior patterns that they have come to identify, through the movies, with "European" (which for them includes American) culture. This is, of course, part of the total misconception of the magic of "European"-style education which enthralles so many developing nations bent on catching up with the technologically advanced parts of the world. This effort, again often misdirected under the sorcery of literacy, I term *ELWC* or *English-as-a-language-of-wider-communication*.

### *ESL*

In countries or parts of a country where English is *the* or *an* official language, but not the first language of the people (*e.g.* India, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and even Quebec), the student at the university level is already, to a degree, bilingual, having been exposed to the second language either as the language of in-

struction in the schools or through mass media. Here again (except for Quebec where a more balanced program is offered by our French-language universities), little attention may be given to linguistic matters, while the study of literature prevails. Nevertheless, since English holds a place as "the other" language in these particular societies, we may classify their programs as *ESL* or *English-as-a-second-language*.

In monolingual, English-speaking countries (e.g. America, Britain, Australia), another kind of ESL has been variously adapted to the needs of foreign students who enroll in the universities. Although the big universities may have impressive language services for foreign students, the greater number of smaller institutions of higher learning continue to treat the matter marginally. If there is a special course for foreign students, its aim is often to prepare them to pass the regular required freshman English course rather than to assist them to acquire the language skills necessary to complete their entire university training. Since they must attend (and presumably comprehend) lectures and discussions, some attempt is usually made to develop an understanding of the spoken word but, even so, more time is often given to the reading and criticism of literature — novels and short stories and poems are supposed to "interest" the student or introduce him to the local "way of life." The rest of the time is spent on composition — the inevitable term papers must be produced somehow — while the more basic goal of audio-lingual control is lost sight of.

### *ESD*

Finally, and sometimes combined with the ESL course for foreign students, there is ESD or English-as-a-second-dialect for those native speakers whose language is sub-standard. The ESD, a non-credit course, is often labelled "dumbbell" English and usually becomes the responsibility of the youngest and most defenseless member of the English department, often an instructor who is himself in the last throes of work on his Ph.D. dissertation in literature. Again the main concern of the teacher is almost inevitably something which in my day was styled "rhetoric and composition," with gems of English literature again provided as models.

You will have concluded by this time that in all of these situations — EFL, ELWC, ESL and ESD — my main criticism is that

literature, rather than language, has received the major share of attention and that audio-lingual mastery of the language has been neglected.

There are compelling and hallowed reasons for this commitment to the visual-graphic band in second language teaching. Academic tradition in the liberal arts has bound us to several propositions which in the light of applied linguistics, may now bear review. One is that a foreign culture is best understood by reading its literature, and the best way to achieve this understanding is by translating its literary masterpieces into the mother tongue — so beginners in German continue to translate *Faust*. Another is that there is a direct relationship between reading or analyzing literary models and developing “clear thinking” in composition. A third supports the theory that there is a necessary correlation between the logico-analytic composition exercise and the synthetic-psychological language control required for effective communication in either the oral or written form.

These are assumptions or half-truths which may have some merit for certain situations. It is true, for example, that students who are already bilingual and bi-cultural may develop a more profound appreciation for, a more refined aesthetic response to, the literatures of both cultures by a wider acquaintance with them. For others, in the process of learning a second language, introduction to the foreign literature may be rather a source of confusion and misunderstanding. The reinforcement in second language learning provided by the visual-graphic band is more disadvantageous for some students than for others. Those attempting to acquire a LWC from a significantly disparate culture and remote language family are likely to have proportionally greater difficulty. Their different perception of reality may interfere with their interpretation, as well as their expression of ideas, and distort them beyond intelligibility. (See E. T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, Doubleday, 1967, where he also points out, p. 3, that the written form is merely an extension of language and should not be confused with it.)

#### *TESL in Developing Areas*

In spite of a widespread awareness of TESL problems, as indicated by the Report of the Commonwealth Conference held at Makerere College, Uganda as long ago as 1961 and the papers of

the Leverhulme Conference (on "Universities and the Language Problems of Tropical Africa") held subsequently at the University College of Ibadan, progress in developing countries is slow. It is in these countries that the tyranny of literacy is the most severe, that the introduction of literature interferes most with the learning of English and is consequently most inappropriate. Although Ethiopia and Korea are outside the Commonwealth and were not represented at either of the conferences mentioned, they present good examples of TESL difficulties to be found in greater or less degree throughout Asia and Africa. Of these, the preoccupation with literature is only one. On the basis of my more recent experience in Ethiopia, let me describe some of the obstacles to an efficient acquisition of ELWC in that area.

First of all, there is, as a rule, a centralized terminal examination (at the end of the eighth and twelfth years), controlled by the national Ministry of Education and based on foreign models such as the London University G.C.E. In Ethiopia the ESLC (Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate), a substitute for the recently (1963) abandoned G.C.E., continues the same type of question with only slight alteration such as the introduction of local place names or native flora and fauna. The English section of this centralized exam, constructed (anonymously) by the literature professors of the university, is viewed by the secondary school teachers and administrators as a test of their own competency. Indeed, both are ranked by the number of "passes" or "fails" in a single school or under an individual instructor. As a result, all teaching is patterned by the previous year's exam and the syllabus is tailored to it. The extent of the trauma of exam time in this kind of system is enormously increased when the test is used, as it is in Ethiopia, for entrance to the university.

For those relatively few students who are successful and enter the university, English is the language of instruction for all subjects, some of which are taught by Ethiopian professors, who may have been trained in Germany or Russia, for example, and who are often themselves unable to communicate easily in English. Other subjects may be taught by Europeans equipped only with English as a second language, learned in adulthood from other non-English speaking teachers. An Ethiopian student in the course of his university career may be exposed to half a dozen types of spoken English which are almost mutually unintelligible.

In addition, English is often for him a third or even a fourth language. He has his tribal tongue or first language. Unless he is an Amhara, he must acquire Amharic as the official Ethiopic language in order to attend primary school. If he was brought up in Eritrea before Confederation, he will have had Italian as his first European tongue and will probably have gone through secondary school with it as the language of instruction. English will be for him a fourth language which he has seldom heard or used.

Whether English is a third or fourth language for the student, he will have had his first instruction in it from native, that is Ethiopian, teachers who have little more audio-lingual control of the language than he has. (According to an AID survey made in 1963, not more than 45% of the English teachers in the Addis Ababa area elementary schools had completed the twelfth grade. The condition outside the capital could be expected to be much worse.) As a result, his introduction to English will probably have been through memorizing word lists, grammar rules (which he recites in his native tongue) and snippets of English literature translated with the aid of the word lists dictated from the teacher's bilingual dictionary.

Any attempt to introduce modern methods — such as that made by the Peace Corps — is almost doomed to failure without a substantial alteration in the overall system of education. Unfortunately, the Peace Corps was requested by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education to fill vacancies at the secondary level where salaries are higher than at the primary, and the saving to the Ministry consequently greater. If PCV's could have been assigned to the elementary schools, at least for English, a beginning could have been made in breaking down resistance to the new methodology at the secondary level. As it was, after such a thorough grounding in the traditional method, students usually objected to any attempt to introduce new techniques. Some classes even held strikes in the current fashion and refused to meet with their American instructors, claiming that the teachers from the U.S. knew no English grammar and therefore were unable to prepare them for the all important ESLC. As a result, many linguistically trained volunteers found English teaching a thoroughly frustrating experience.

With their mainly visual-graphic background, the Ethiopian students at Haile Sellassie I University frequently found themselves in competition with those from other African states where

English had been the public language for several generations. Exposure to a spoken and more colloquial English language environment had given most of the students from former British colonial areas (Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone) a considerable amount of fluency which the Ethiopians noticeably lacked. In addition, these "foreign" students (usually not more than one representative of any country had a scholarship) had to speak to each other in English, the only language they shared. As a result they had continuous practice, while the Ethiopians spoke to each other in Amharic. During the period of its African scholarship program, HSIU was probably unique in that its "foreign" students spoke the language of instruction better than its native enrollees.

The staffing problem, another of the big headaches in the new universities of Asia and Africa, is often intensified by the urgency of recruitment and lack of knowledge and experience of those responsible for it. Impatient to get higher education under way, administrators may be forced to hire readily available resident personnel. An expatriate who left England fifteen or twenty years previously, and has since been teaching the *Vicar of Wakefield* in a local mission school, may find himself suddenly in charge of a collegiate department. His unfamiliar job may be complicated further, for instance, when word comes down to him that a "lecture-ship" must be found in his new department for a Cabinet Minister's son who is returning from the States (where he wrote his Master's thesis on Emily Dickinson).

In general, most of the language learning and teaching difficulties found in Africa have existed to some extent in Asia after World War II. However, since the language of instruction at universities in the Far East is, as a rule, the mother tongue of the students, there is less need for aural/oral fluency. The vocational advantage of speaking the language of the occupying power, in Japan or Korea, has gradually become less of a motivating force as the American presence has been withdrawn and English has gradually returned to its normal role as a LWC. In Japan, especially, where the influence of Charles Fries has been strong, headway has been made in establishing the linguistic approach, at least in the teacher training institutions. This is an important beginning. The pressure for public fluency in English has now doubtless shifted to Southeast Asia, especially to Viet Nam where university training in English may be interrupted for some time but private and public

advantage will continue to depend, as it did in Korea in the late 40's, on ease of communication with the occupying force. We may expect another rash of "G.I." English in Southeast Asia before language training at the university level will be resumed. Perhaps, by then, university language programs will be firmly based on the methods of applied linguistics.

In any event, until the developing countries fully realize the economic, social and political importance of their language programs, take definite steps to establish specific, limited linguistic objectives, and organize their education systems to support these objectives, there is little hope of their freeing themselves from the communication difficulties which presently divide and depress them. They must decide which language is to function for them as an LWC (be it English, French, Spanish, Russian, Swahili, Mandarin, or some other) and aim for that goal from the beginning of instruction. This does not mean that no other language may have a place in the curriculum, only that the LWC must have the priority necessary within the language orbit the country has chosen for its political/economic security.

With a generation of students entering the university in possession of the language skills adequate for ordinary bilingual control, it will be more efficient to offer courses of study in the literature of the foreign language, with some expectation of understanding and appreciation for the cultural background it illuminates.