

# Standards and Development in ELT

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## From methods training to teacher development

The quest for the perfect method fizzled out in the 1960s when research on the effectiveness of individual methods yielded inconclusive and contradictory results (e.g. Brown, 2000; Woods, 1996). There is increasing evidence that what determines the actual classroom procedures is not the methodological framework itself, but the teacher's interpretation of the framework - the teacher's personal methodology if you like (e.g. Roberts, 1998; Ulichny, 1996).

A significant result of the shift from *method* to *teacher* was a corresponding shift from *training* to *development*, with the attendant view of teachers as life-long learners, researchers and methodologists. This new perspective has the potential to contribute to the improvement of standards in ELT and the empowerment of language teachers. Developing our personal, contextualised methodologies is clearly preferable to trying (or being forced) to fit the methodological Procrustes' bed of the moment, or being treated as uninformed consumers in the ELT supermarket.

## Over-emphasis on development

Unfortunately, the penchant for pendulum swings in ELT has, in some cases, led to views which emphasise development over initial education. Such views seem to disregard (and draw attention away from) the need to attain a minimum level of knowledge and skills **before** one is admitted to the ELT profession. The thinking behind them is summarised in the following analogy between learners and teachers (Edge, 2002):

In the same way that we try to be sensitive to the fact that different learners learn at their best in different ways, we need to be sensitive to the fact that different teachers teach at their best in different ways. For this reason, and out of a sense of professional respect for colleagues whose development will follow different paths than my own, and lead to different outcomes, I feel that I need to offer them the same sense of empowerment that I claim for myself: if you are making the kind of commitment to continuing professional growth that I have been talking about, I believe that you deserve respect for your teaching.

When we only see **teachers as learners**, the analogy makes perfect sense. The pitfalls become evident when we consider the other side of the coin: **teachers as professionals**. Learners, as clients, have of course the prerogative to learn as little or as slowly as they can or want. Teachers, however, as providers of a paid service, are fully accountable for the content and process of teaching, and at least partly accountable for its outcome. This is where the analogy breaks down. As a learner-client, I'm not concerned with what my teachers' level will be in a few years; I'm concerned with what it is **now**. Also, the fact that my teachers are doing their best is no consolation if their best is not good enough.

## ELT: standards and status

ELT is a professional community with extremely relaxed entry requirements, particularly as regards the private sector (e.g. Perkins, 2002). This is mainly due to the popular myth that a native/good command of a language and an ill-defined 'love' or 'knack' for teaching can magically turn someone into a language teacher. Another reason is the belief that a short training course is adequate preparation for a career in language teaching. Since there are quick and easy routes to 'becoming' a language teacher, ELT is regarded by many as a fairly low-status occupation (see Brown, 1998), and language teachers are often treated as mere "materials operators" in need of simple and easy-to-use miracle methods (Gabrielatos, 2001b).

I am well aware that my position can invite accusations of disrespect towards my colleagues - particularly from those who may feel threatened by such views. If I am disrespectful, then I am not alone. I am sure readers will remember the heated debate about the certification and standards of EFL teachers in Greece in the letters pages of *ELT News* (issues 136-140, June-October 2000); here are some similar views expressed by language teaching professionals operating in a variety of contexts:

- "There have always been teachers who can turn the base metal of the coursebook into pure gold. And there will always be other teachers who - as a colleague memorably put it - couldn't teach their way out of a paper-bag." (Thornbury, 2002)
- "I also know that there also exist extremely incompetent, unimaginative, and ineffective foreign language teachers who are not only failing to meet students' learning goals, but destroying any interest the student might have in learning a language. I have met and observed them too, in numbers and in places that I find disturbing." (Maxwell, 2002)
- "The lack of respect with which ELT professionals are regarded sometimes is at the very least saddening. ... There are two sources for the lack of esteem in which ELT is sometimes held. First, there are the cowboy operators who lower the tone for everybody else. ... The other problem is the job's status." (Brown, 1998: 3)
- "TESOL is not a highly regulated field. ... The reality is that for many of us there is no minimum standard to be met for background education. There are often no requirements for continuing education. All is optional." (Perkins, 2002: 101)

The problem is compounded by the one-sided view of development, which chooses to ignore the situation and focus on an expressed will to 'develop'. But we can only develop **as** teachers if we have already **become** teachers; that is, reflective practice can only lead to development when it is informed and principled. Otherwise, 'development' can be reduced to little more than stumbling in the dark, or chasing our tails (see Gabrielatos, 2001a).

A more realistic (and honest) justification for the over-emphasis on development would be along the following lines: *Since the current system makes it easy for someone to work as a language teacher, the least we can do is try to minimise the damage by stressing the value of ongoing development as much as possible, and encouraging those without the requisite knowledge and skills to acquire them **after** they have been accepted in the ELT community.*

Finally, coming back to the issue of *respect*, I'd like to draw attention to the disrespect done to those learners who are used as paying guinea pigs, so that the aspiring teacher might eventually become one.

## The best of both worlds

Ongoing development is essential in any professional field, but so are appropriate standards for entrance to the profession. It is detrimental to the status of the ELT community to accept someone as a colleague merely on the strength of their language competence, their willingness to become a teacher and their expressed commitment to 'development'. Even if we were born with a gift for teaching, we need first to acquire the foundation that will enable us to develop that gift.

One step towards improving the standards and status of ELT is distinguishing between developing *as a teacher* and developing *towards becoming a teacher*.

## References

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