The house of TESEP and the communicative approach: the special needs of state English language education

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Many teachers in state English language education around the world are unsure about the appropriateness of the communicative approach to the conditions prevalent in their classrooms. One reason for this may be that they are trying to use a particularly narrow interpretation of this approach produced, for very different classroom contexts, by branches of the ELT community in Britain, North America, or Australasia. There is, in other words, a problem of technology transfer between these branches of the profession and the rest of the world. However, there does exist a broader version of the communicative approach which has within it the potential to adapt to all types of classroom context, provided it is informed by local knowledge. Teachers in state education already have this local knowledge about their students and the realities of their classrooms. Their experience must be capitalized upon and incorporated into a more environment-sensitive communicative approach.

Introduction During a seminar for secondary school teachers in South Africa, one experienced teacher commented 'We have been feeling guilty about standing up in front of our students and talking.' She and her colleagues had been led to believe that in the communicative classroom students should spend most of their time sitting in groups practising English with each other. She had the notion that there was little excuse for teacher-fronted lessons. From talking to many teachers of English, both as a second and as a foreign language, based in secondary and tertiary institutions in different parts of the world, I get the impression that there is widespread consternation at being faced with this 'new' methodology, which they feel they ought to adopt to be up-to-date, but which does not seem to suit the nature of their classrooms.

This paper seeks to explore a possible cause of this problem, which I suggest is not simply a matter of 'communicative' versus 'traditional', but something much deeper. Without wishing to be unduly divisive, I would argue that the problem concerns the nature of technology transfer between two parts of the English language teaching profession. I use the term

'technology' to refer not only to hard- and software used in the classroom, but to the whole range of methodologies, techniques, and procedures which make up classroom practice, plus their realization in textbooks and classroom material.[1]

Two parts of the profession

Instrumentally-oriented ELT

One part of the profession originates in Britain, Australasia, and North America (the 'BANA' countries)[2]. Here, English language teaching tends to be instrumentally oriented, in that it has grown up within a private language school ethos where there has been considerable freedom to develop classroom methodology as a sophisticated instrument to suit the precise needs of language learners. It has been possible to define and create a technology based on good classroom conditions to suit the needs of particular markets. Students come as individuals or in groups to learn English, and the technology does whatever is necessary to provide them with a quality product.

This type of English language teaching can be found in private language schools in the BANA countries and in private language schools elsewhere in the world which are their subsidiaries or upon whose model they are based. It can be found in the cultural centres of BANA countries abroad and in English language teaching operations found in higher education in BANA countries—although these are not private, they take students on a commercial basis, and provide a specific service.

Institutionally-influenced ELT

The other part of the profession comprises tertiary, secondary, and primary English language education in the rest of the world ('TESEP'). Unlike the BANA type, English in these institutions is taught as part of a wider curriculum and is therefore influenced and constrained by wider educational, institutional, and community forces quite different from those in the BANA sector.

The logistics and interests of the wider curriculum in any state institution affect the resources allocated to English language teaching, such as the number of hours available, the timetable, the class size, furniture, and facilities. There are also constraints and influences on individual teaching style. An English language teacher behaves not only according to the needs of language learning, but also according to the norms set by other subjects. For example, there may be peer pressure against a teacher introducing group work into her or his classroom, on the grounds that students will carry new expectations into other subject classrooms which their teachers might find disruptive.

Similarly, the expectations of students will be influenced by what they experience in other subjects. Strong traditions of both teaching and learning will be carried from previous generations of teachers and students within the institution. Moreover, every member of the community will have an influencing perception about what should happen in a school or university. What happens in TESEP English language classrooms stems from deep within the society as a whole; and the role of the TESEP English language teacher is not only to teach English but also to socialize the student as a member of that society.

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This state of affairs is quite different from that in BANA English language teaching, where the notions of 'school', 'classroom', and 'teacher' are defined within a more specialized commercial or adult education context. Whether the English language school or institute is in their own country or abroad, students who wish to attend the BANA institute are likely to be more prepared to leave behind the more traditional notions of school and university to embark upon a completely different experience, where learning is instrumental rather than institutional.

These descriptions of BANA and TESEP are of course idealized, and represent extreme examples at each end of a continuum. Different institutions will be located at different points along that continuum.

Technology transfer

It can safely be said that most of the technology of English language teaching is produced by the BANA side of the profession. Books which propound the technology and textbooks which demonstrate its use come almost entirely from BANA publishers. The most prestigious MA, diploma, and training courses for teachers are carried out either in BANA institutions, or in institutions in other countries which are staffed or monitored by BANA personnel. The seminars and workshops carried out in TESEP countries which are considered to be most effective are nearly always given or initiated by BANA institutions or travelling 'experts'. TESEP teachers, if they wish to obtain the most 'prestigious' professional development, must therefore go to BANA-oriented institutions where they become direct recipients of BANA technology. The outcome is that many TESEP teachers depend on BANA technology for a wide range of professional support—creating a significant one-way technology transfer from BANA to TESEP situations.

Technology transfer is not in itself a bad thing. Human affairs depend upon the exchange of ideas. However, in the case of English language education, there are several problems:

a. the narrowness of the technology which is sold to TESEP teachers, and its subsequent lack of adaptability to their teaching situations
b. the lack of ownership of the technology by TESEP teachers
c. the narrowness of the second language acquisition research which underlies the technology.

I shall deal with each of these problems in turn, and suggest how they might be addressed.

The effective narrowness of BANA technology

I do not believe that BANA technology is essentially narrow and unadaptable to TESEP situations. I shall argue in the second half of this paper that, by its very nature, the communicative approach does have the *potential* for being adaptable to any educational situation. However, the technology which is, in effect, most commonly imported to the TESEP world involves a much narrower version of the communicative approach, which is *not* adaptable. This narrower version suits the majority of BANA classrooms and is therefore very popular, occupying the majority of textbooks, and professional literature, and the largest portion of the seminars and training courses which carry the technology abroad.

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The learning group ideal   This popular form of BANA technology presents a learning group ideal—an ideal classroom and behaviour scenario which does not correspond to many TESEP classrooms. Two complementary principles, of this ideal are that (i) group and pair work are effective learning modes[3] and (ii) these modes can be most effectively set up and monitored in small classes. Thus, the majority of BANA classrooms have fifteen or fewer students, an emphasis on learning through group practice, and substantial teacher control over what students say and write. The teacher has to be there to hear what students say and to be able to provide repair where necessary. The emphasis is thus on precise classroom management and there is a strong classroom regime. Reading and writing are not excluded as foci. However, what many TESEP teachers see in this classroom paradigm is an emphasis on oral communication (e.g. Tomlinson, 1990:27), with a high premium on maximum opportunity for student oral initiation (Nunan, 1987).

Although, on the face of it, these principles can be taken on board by adding oral 'communicative activities' to the practice phase of more 'traditional' structure-based lessons (Allwright, 1992), there are bound to be problems within many TESEP classrooms. The nature of the classroom group is likely to be fixed by the institution; and little can be done about classes which are too large for the teacher to monitor group and pair work effectively. Especially where there is a common mother tongue, the control required to ensure quality target language practice does not exist. Athough the teacher-centredness of more 'traditional' approaches is said to exercise unnecessary authority, this authority is based on transmission of subject matter, and is not managerial in nature. Thus, the *classroom regime* upon which the BANA approach is based does not exist. There is instead an *institutional regime* which cannot easily be adjusted to fit the imported technology. TESEP teachers who try to include group or pair work on this basis report that these activities do not work. The communicative approach is often rejected on these grounds. However, the main reason for 'failure' is likely to be ineffective management brought about by difficult-to-manage classroom situations.

The need to re-interpret   One of the reasons, therefore, for the inadequacy of BANA technology within TESEP classrooms is the way in which the communicative approach is presented. What is often not understood in the process of technology transfer is the environment-sensitive side of the approach.

Hutchinson and Waters (1984:108) state that an essential attribute of the communicative approach is that methodology is geared not only to the competence but also to the 'expectations of those participating in the learning process'. This seems common sense for any effective classroom methodology; and yet the so-called communicative methodology that TESEP teachers may read about in books is unlikely to have been geared to the expectations of *their* students.

The point is that communicative activities can take more forms than simply practicing oral communication in pairs and groups. They can involve text analysis, for example, where students communicate, not so

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much with each other as with a text, to solve a language problem about how the text works. There are immediate advantages of text-based activities for TESEP classrooms:

1 Students can work in groups or individually.
2 If they work in groups there is no reason why they cannot use their mother tongue. They have to read or listen to something in English, and perhaps produce a written or oral outcome to the activity in English, but they can talk *about* the text, and *about* what they are going to produce, in whatever language suits this purpose.
3 If this is the aim, given the design of the activity, there might not be a need for close teacher monitoring. Teachers in large classes can see from a distance whether or not students are getting on with the work, and assess what has been learnt by the task outcomes.
4 The texts can have many forms, from recordings of speech, or teachers reading aloud for listening practice, to examples of grammar, to which problems can be set[4]. Even a lecture can have a communicative function, such as providing an oral text on which students can carry out communicative information transfer activities.

Learning-centredness

Another area of misinterpretation surrounds the whole popular notion of learner-centredness. This concept is inherently problematic for TESEP teachers who perceive it as meaning that they will have to relinquish authority to allow for student autonomy. Especially within the state education context, the learner is not the sole focus of what happens in the classroom. Hutchinson and Waters' reminder that 'education is . . . a compromise between the individual and society' (1984:108) makes much more sense to TESEP teachers, who may well have less ability to cut society out of the classroom. In English language classrooms in state education, teachers, institutions, and the community as a whole are also stakeholders in what happens in the classroom. It seems far more realistic to see learning as a primary objective, to be achieved only after the requirements of these stakeholders have been met—hence *learning*-rather than *learner*-centredness.

Again, it is a misinterpretation that a communicative approach cannot be designed to consider the requirements of these stakeholders. Hutchinson and Waters go on to say that a communicative approach should be geared not only to the students, but to 'all the parties concerned' (ibid.). This further underlines the fact that the communicative approach should not be narrow at all, but essentially adaptable to all the requirements of the classroom situation within its wider institutional and social setting. 'Communicative' does not therefore mean having students practising communication in pairs or groups. It means making decisions, appropriate to the educational environment, about whether or not, or how often to have pair or group work, and about the lesson's focus—on speaking, reading, writing, grammar, pronunciation, etc., none of which need be precluded in a communicative approach. However, these must be principled decisions, based upon what is currently known about how language is learnt. I shall say more about this in the final section of this article.

The problem of ownership

The second problem connected with technology transfer is that TESEP teachers are largely *recipients* of a BANA technology that originates elsewhere. This state of affairs can often be manifested by a surface understanding of the technology. One reason for the communicative approach being perceived as narrower than it ought to be is that, though varied in approach and substance from the point of view of the BANA initiators, it is received as 'established practice' by TESEP teachers who have had no stake in its development[5]. The communicative approach can thus take on the form of a rather abstract theory, divorced from the realities of TESEP classrooms. Teachers who read the books and attend the seminars and courses, once the peculiarities of the discourse of BANA science are overcome, will be able to articulate the basic concepts of the technology, discussing and working it academically, finding it professionally soothing to go through the motions of up-to-date talk. However, this mastery of the theory will remain divorced from the reality and practice of the classroom, where, as I have argued above, the technology cannot really be applied[6]. There is then a danger that this abstract theory will find its way to TESEP colleges of education, where it may be taught as an academic subject, still with little connection with the realities of the classroom.

The only way to close this gap between perceived theory and practice is to acknowledge the realities of TESEP classrooms during the formation of the technology itself. The gap arises because these realities are seen as *constraints* to a BANA technology, and therefore left to the end, when they need to be seen as the *rationale* for a TESEP technology[7].

The notion of culture takes on an important role here. In English language education, the term is often used within the context of 'culture profiling' of students according to their national or regional traits—e.g. Arab culture, Koranic culture, Japanese culture (see Valdes, 1986). Characteristics based upon these traits have often been seen as constraints to the ideals of classroom behaviour set by BANA technology. Their descriptions thus tend to be BANA constructs which over-generalize and stereotype TESEP personalities and blur and inhibit any real analysis of classroom realities. Elsewhere I argue that it is much more useful to look at smaller culture variables, such as institutional, student, and teacher cultures, and at resourcing problems, which may derive from other than national or regional boundaries (Holliday, 1991[8]).

The narrowness of second language acquisition research

A final factor which underpins the apparent inappropriacy of BANA technology is the narrowness of second language acquisition research. Others have commented on its failure to tell us what we need to know about what happens between students in real classroom situations (Breen, 1986; Allwright, 1988). Its value is that it addresses how the individual learner learns language. The problem is that the learner is not really a person in a real social setting, but rather an almost robotic entity whose sole purpose for being in the classroom seems to be to learn language. To help methodologies relate to the realities of TESEP classrooms it is important to know not about learners but about *pupils* and *students* in real

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classroom settings, where there may be many other influences on language learning from the society outside as well as within the classroom (Thorp, 1991; Young, 1987). We also need studies on the social affects surrounding teacher behaviour in specific social settings, and on the exigencies of institutions and wider educational environments.

Of course, research into this softer social area is more difficult to quantify and to justify as a means of providing the accountability needed by an increasingly competitive BANA professional group. Savignon (1991:274) makes the point that 'researchers eager to establish SLA as a worthy field of enquiry turned their attention to more narrow, quantitative studies.' This seems to me to be research for BANA purposes[9]. Allwright's suggestion (1988:51) that we need instead to find out what happens between people in the classroom directs our thoughts more towards research for TESEP purposes.

Teachers are the key

Savignon also reminds us, indirectly supporting the argument against a purely learner-centred approach, that teachers too are very important participants in the classroom. They possess a great deal of knowledge about their students within a social context. It is with them that the research necessary to find truly appropriate methodologies must lie. The notion of teacher-oriented research for the purpose of developing appropriate methodologies is gaining respectability (Allwright, 1992). There are still, however, few published examples of this in TESEP situations, Naidu *et al.* (1992) being a marked exception. The emphasis for the TESEP community must be to reflect on and develop teaching techniques to suit *real* classrooms, not techniques developed for classrooms in distant lands.

Preserving the best of what has been achieved

I do not wish to argue that there is no possibility for BANA technology to be useful in the TESEP context, or that the only appropriate methodologies will be those produced solely in TESEP contexts. However, instead of the current, unacceptable situation of a one-way technology transfer based very much on the perceived superiority of BANA products, it would be much more realistic to have a market-place in which there would be an informed exchange of technology (Hyde, 1993). Although in the short term much of the production of English language teaching technology must remain within BANA countries, BANA industry must learn from TESEP experience, to make its products appropriate to TESEP needs. Nor am I against TESEP teachers travelling to BANA institutions for professional development. As well as providing quality training and development, a current irreplaceable value of such institutions is the opportunity afforded to TESEP teachers to broaden their professional perspectives through meeting colleagues from other countries. However, the quality of training which such institutions can provide will depend very much on how much experience they care to get about TESEP situations, and how far their courses respond to this experience.

A further caution to my argument is that basing appropriate methodologies on local contexts does not necessarily mean ignoring the

strengths of BANA technology. Although it would be wrong to assume that the BANA world has had a monopoly on modern language teaching methodologies (Hyde, 1993), it is the case that adaptable, environment-sensitive, communicative approaches, *are* the product of that part of BANA technology, which has been informed by experience from a variety of classroom situations. Indeed, this paper is very much influenced by the experience of a particular group of BANA professionals who have worked for many years on aid projects, learning about TESEP classrooms—even though the effects of this experience have been limited, have had little influence on the more popular form of the technology described earlier in this paper, and have, perhaps, tended to report on 'problems' created by local attitudes and institutions, which are seen as 'deficient' and which BANA technology must somehow overcome.

The communicative revolution in English language teaching has taken place and cannot be ignored. It acknowledges the undeniable fact that students bring with them to the classroom a great deal of competence, which has to be addressed. I do not intend that my argument be used to support those teachers who favour a supermarket-type eclectic approach, where different methods and approaches are seen as a series of products which can be picked off the shelf. The communicative approach has been a development from previous methodologies; and further improvement can only be achieved by further development, not by going back.

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Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1992 IATEFL conference in Lille. A wider discussion of the subject matter can be found in Holliday (forthcoming).

2 For the sake of convenience, 'BANA' and 'TESEP' will be used as adjectives and will therefore precede nouns such as *countries, personnel, technology, situations*, etc.

3 This principle of collaborative learning is founded partly on findings in group psychology and management (Wright, 1987:36–45) and partly on second language acquisition research (Long and Porter, 1985).

4 Examples of communicative grammar activities for classes of over 300 are described in Azer (1990). Group work is used both as a means for the students to be less dependent on the teacher, and to enable the teacher to watch and learn how the students are getting on. The texts are short and can be written on the blackboard.

5 This may also be the case for BANA teachers who have had no role in the generation of the approach, but relatively less so than for the more distanced TESEP teachers.

6 This separation between theory and practice can be seen in the setting up of a 'hidden curriculum' by local teachers in curriculum projects (Kennedy, 1987:164; Holliday, 1990).

7 This is reminiscent of the discussion surrounding the role of constraints in syllabus design (Swales, 1980; Bowers and Widdowson, 1986).

8 For example, differences between BANA and TESEP practice can be usefully seen in terms of conflicting skills- and subject-oriented professional-academic cultures (see also Holliday, 1992).

9 A Moroccan English language educationalist cited by Hyde (1992:3) as saying that English is really 'using "us" [the Moroccans] for special purposes' might not be so far from the truth.

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