English Language Teaching in the 1990s: How Will Teachers Fit in?

Stephen Gaies

This article proposes that the directions that English language teaching will take in the 1990s can be discerned from trends that are now firmly in place. The growth of English language teaching as an international enterprise and the efforts that have been made to professionalize our work offer important lessons for the next decade. Progress in language teaching results from the search for what is universal about classroom language teaching and learning, and from an appreciation of the distinctive features of particular teaching and learning settings. Like cultural anthropologists, we need to adopt an ethnographic view of classroom teaching and learning. Beyond that, we must encourage the trend in our field to redefine the nature of authority and expertise and to encourage those who work in a particular setting to determine what they wish to value in English language teaching methodology, materials, and goals.

教師の位置

　本稿は英語教育が1990年代にとる方向が、現在位置づけられた傾向とは異ったものになることを提案する。英語教育を国際的進取まで伸張し、専門化しようと努力し、次の10年間になすべき課題を提示する。語学教育の進歩は学校英語教育と学習においての不遍性への探究や個々の語学教育・学習背景に見られる特徴を認めることに起因する。文化人類学者のように、教師は教室での教育と学習について民族学的観点を採択する必要がある。それ以後は、我々の専問分野における流れを育成する中に権威や専門知識の本質を再度明確にし、教師は各々の立場で教授法、教材、目的の中で、何を評価すべきか認識するように努めねばならない。

　JALT's theme for its most recent conference—"Directions for the '90s"—is the kind that invites us to look back, to look around, and to look forward. It is an appropriate theme, certainly, one that has been the staple of professional meetings in our field at the beginning of each decade. Each new decade offers us an artificial but

useful vantage point from which to take stock of ourselves, individually and collectively—to allow ourselves to take a panoramic view of our field, one that we must sometimes ignore as we sense the need to focus narrowly on our daily work and research demands.

If we look back, we can identify two paradoxes in our thinking about the challenges of language teaching and learning. One of these is the result of our increased knowledge about these processes. The spread of English, the unprecedented demand for English language instruction, and the professionalization of English language teaching over the past decades have increased our knowledge enormously. There can hardly be any doubt that, in a purely quantitative sense, we know much more about language teaching and learning than we did a generation ago. For many reasons, however, this accumulated knowledge has led, not to bold confidence about how to teach English, not to stronger and stronger faith in the wisdom of how we go about our work, but rather to what to outsiders is a surprising professional modesty. English language teaching specialists cringe whenever and wherever they see unreasonable claims made about the speed and ease with which one or another language teaching enterprise claims to be able to teach English. Or they may ask, What do these people know that we've been missing all this time? But those moments of doubt soon dissipate, once we remind ourselves that all our accumulated knowledge, impressive as it is in itself, does not translate easily—and sometimes not at all—into more effective teaching and into more effective and satisfying learning on the part of our students. Indeed, many people who skim our professional literature for the first time might well think along these lines from E.M. Forster: "Oh, yes, you have learned men, who collect . . . facts, and facts, and empires of facts. But which of them will rekindle the light within?" (1910).

This paradox seems to be in the process of being at least partially resolved. We are coming to recognize that the formulation of theories and models of second language development is a valuable activity, whether or not it has much to say about classroom teaching and learning. And the knowledge we have gained about language teaching and

learning from efforts to develop and test theory offers enormous raw material that has already informed language teaching and that will undoubtedly continue to do so. Even now, there appears to be increasing recognition that an assumption widely held a decade ago—the assumption that applied linguistic research should justify itself in terms of the potential insights it might offer to language teachers and program designers—is on the wane. The resolution of the paradox, then, is not so much in terms of the type and focus of inquiry that is taking place in applied linguistics, but rather in terms of the expectations that the language teaching field feels justified in making about that inquiry.

Now, for the second paradox—the one that seems further from being resolved than the first. It is this: Our focus on learners and on how learners' native abilities and learning characteristics can be given room to operate fully in the classroom has until recently not been matched by a similar interest in the teacher. The literature of the last few decades has been largely colored by the assumption that given free rein, teachers will muck things up. They'll talk too much, they'll stress accuracy-based practice over opportunities, they'll even ask students questions to which they, the teachers, already know the answers: all in all, they'll generally get in the way and get things wrong.

Indeed, for most of the last two decades, we have looked at language classrooms primarily in terms of methods or of the learner. Although the teacher has not been altogether absent from such discussions, the role assigned to the teacher in methods-driven views or learner-driven views of classroom language learning has been a secondary one. Very often, the teacher, if discussed at all, has been seen as a potential contaminating variable: a participant whose most likely contribution would be to mess things up.

We've found many ways to minimize the damage a teacher can do: examination systems that force teachers to stick to the official syllabus and textbooks; pacing schedules that program classroom time down to the last second; form-focused drills that restrict the teacher's role to that of a

language calisthenics leader. Teachers are technicians: press the right buttons, and don't do anything else.

In many respects, the pendulum is starting to swing back. Many of the premises of the 1970s and 1980s are undergoing critical evaluation. For example, we have been made aware that what we view as "natural" and not natural about language development depends to a large degree on the metaphors and meanings in which we choose to cast our arguments (e.g., Bourne, 1988). We sometimes get so entangled in our conceptualizations that we produce oxymoronic and other terminological contortions such as "real reality" (Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1985; Taylor, 1982) and "artificial authenticity" (Fried-Booth, 1982). In short, we seem at times to have lost our bearings. Is it more natural for language learners to approach members of the target-language community to practice language than it is for the same learners to do so with a teacher in a classroom? If classrooms are so much at odds with "reality," whatever that may mean, why do learners continue, without a moment's hesitation, to seek formal instruction at whatever point they decide that they wish to develop ability in a foreign language?

In contrast to the view that has predominated for many years that the best thing teachers can do is to get out of the way and let learners' natural language acquisition capacity operate—a view entirely in harmony with Newmark's (1966) frequently cited injunctions about how not to interfere with language learning—we are coming back to the view (one which, quite happily, teachers themselves never abandoned) that classrooms should do more than to contort themselves into imitations of the world outside the classroom walls or into rarefied laboratory environments. But if we are returning to an earlier view, the perspective is not the same. Teaching is no longer being discussed primarily as the execution of technical expertise—in terms of dispensing grammatical information or of orchestrating practice—but rather in management terms (e.g., White, 1988). Teaching, we have come to recognize again, is decision making (e.g., Richards, 1990), and it cannot be reduced to something less than that.

What does it mean to view teaching as decision making? It means, among other things, that methods do not cause learning to take place. Nor do materials, nor does educational technology. Nor are learners' latent abilities sufficient, not if we are talking about classroom learning on the scale on which it is being practiced today. Every one of these can be counted as an important ingredient. But so too can the teacher. Methods don't work by themselves: teachers make them work. Teachers can bring to life the most stilted materials, as well as cause even the most exciting materials to seem lifeless. Teachers can create an atmosphere conducive to even the most reticent learner, just as they can inadvertently or consciously cause the magic of language learning to dissipate in their classrooms. Qualities such as *rapport*—dismissed by many as difficult to measure and hence not relevant—turn out, so it seems, to be very relevant, more so perhaps than many of the behaviors that teachers are trained to *perform*. Nevertheless, we cannot restore the teacher to a central position in the language classroom by fiat. We need to go beyond this; we need to explore the implications of the view of teachers as decision makers. In particular, we must ask how this view shapes the way we look at classrooms and how it affects our understanding of what we see.

If we look around, we see the emergence, integral to the view of the teacher as a central player in the classroom, of a fundamentally different view of the basis of knowledge, expertise, and decision making in language teaching. I propose that we are coming to recongize the importance of an interpretive view of language teaching. In other words, we are asserting not only that teachers make a difference, but that to understand better how teachers shape the classroom experience of their students, we (and teachers themselves) need to come as close as we can to teachers' own perspectives on their work.

Here are some of the building blocks, the beginnings of an ethnographic view of teachers and teaching:

1. **The adoption of a more sophisticated sense of relativism toward language teaching and language decision making.**

We must go beyond the uncontroversial statement that teaching and learning settings differ, and that teaching and learning are shaped by the context in which they take place. Obviously they do, sometimes enormously, at least to judge by superficial appearances. Indeed, we have yet to understand fully what differences among settings are truly distinctive—this, by the way, is one of the many practical ways in which theory-building and -testing *can* contribute to language teaching; but there is clearly enough evidence to alert us to the dangers of generalizations about language teaching and learning.

What we need to do is go beneath the surface, to strive to understand classrooms from the perspective of the participants. We want to understand, not just how what is done in one setting or by one teacher differs from what is done in another setting or by another teacher, but why. What are the formative influences, the values, and the constraints that cause different teachers to respond so differently? Let me give some examples, the first of which comes from Robert O'Neill's (1982) defense of published textbooks.

O'Neill describes his experience, in the 1970s, as a teacher of English in a German shipyard, in a program in which a group of Iranians were being trained to maintain and repair submarines—a program in which instruction was to be done in English. At the end of his 3-week stint, O'Neill oriented his replacement to what he, O'Neill, had done. The new teacher was appalled to learn that O'Neill had been using a published textbook, rather than creating materials expressly for this training program.

As O'Neill explains, one can only understand the reaction of this teacher if one recognizes that locally-produced materials were assumed, almost as a matter of faith, to be inherently better than any published materials. Further, to understand this teacher's views regarding materials, it would be necessary to recognize that this was no idiosyncratic preference on the part of a single individual, but the result of what the teacher had been trained to value.

To an outsider unwilling to understand the context from which this teacher's decision making would spring, this aspect of the teacher's professionalism might be difficult to deal with. Is this any less understandable, is it any less objectionable, than the persistence with which other teachers in other places might reject any innovation that they perceived as challenging their authority?

Similar examples can be found in any teaching setting. I have observed teachers so committed to the idea of groupwork that in the absence of any small-group activity in their lesson plan, they will have students arrange themselves in groups of three prior to doing individual work. One such teacher, when asked about the necessity of doing this, admitted candidly that she just felt better knowing that for part of a classroom lesson, students were physically in small groups, whether or not they were actually functioning as a group.

An ethnographic perspective aims at understanding, not at change. But the necessary first step for anyone interested in promoting change in teaching is understanding—from the insider's perspective. In the last few years, we have become keenly sensitive to the problems that arise when those who wish to affect teachers' practices fail to take account of the context in which particular teachers work, when they fail to recognize the insider's view. Some (e.g., Burnaby & Sun, 1988) point out the futility—and in some cases the counterproductive nature—of efforts made in crosscultural exchanges to prescribe what teachers should and should not do that are not based on an adequate understanding of the distinctive features of a setting, without an awareness of how those particular features are valued by those who work in that setting. Others (e.g., Pennycook, 1989; Sampson, 1984) stress the value-laden nature of educational theory. To promote particular practices on the basis of their presumed instructional value, without careful consideration of their effect on the social ecology of a particular setting, leads to charges of academic and/or cultural imperialism.

2. We must recognize the need to understand better how teachers themselves perceive what they do. How do teachers construct a meaning for the abstractions that we call methods, materials exploitation, and interaction?

Two of the most fruitful by-products of our long interest in methods as keys to understanding language teaching and learning may well be the discovery, first of all, that traditional descriptions of language teaching methods might have little relation to what goes on in language classrooms; and second, that by continuing to portray methods as if each has an exclusively objective reality, the nature of the process by which decisions in language teaching occur are obscured. In teacher reference texts and in other discussions of classroom language teaching and learning, the basic working vocabulary of our field—*methods, activities, syllabus,* and so on— is typically portrayed as if the concepts to which these terms refer have an objective reality that we all perceive similarly. Change in language classrooms, then, is traditionally assumed to involve teachers' altering their repertoire of behaviors much in the way we change our wardrobe; that is, by acquiring new items and putting others into storage or in some cases by throwing them out altogether.

Recent discussions, however, have emphasized the point that classroom methods, activities, techniques, and even aims and goals, whatever their abstract, objective reality, manifest themselves in classrooms in accordance with the way in which teachers (together with learners) construct meanings for them. What we see, when we observe teachers and learners in action, is not the mechanical application of methods and techniques, but rather a reflection of how teachers have *interpreted* these things. For example, Swaffar, Arens, and Morgan (1982) point out that for teachers, "it is not the characteristic activities per se that discriminate between methodologies, but the ways in which those characteristic activities reinforce each other in the foreign language learning process" (p. 32).

In many cases, the significance of a methodological innovation for a teacher, or for a group of teachers, may have less to do with any presumed value as a set of instructional strategies and techniques, and far more to do with its ability to cause the teacher(s) to reflect differently and perhaps more deeply about the classroom, to adopt a reflective attitude toward his or her teaching. As Prabhu (1990) notes:

> a distinction between "real" and mechanical teaching is more significant for pedagogy than any distinction between good and bad methods. The enemy of good teaching is not a bad method, but overroutinisation. (p. 174)

3. We can nurture the many ways in which the tradtional view of "expertise" in language teaching is being constructively challenged.

Teacher educators and teachers themselves are raising questions about the value of the outsider's perspective and about who is best placed to set the agenda for research and development in language teaching. "Top-down," "center-periphery," "prescriptive," and "input" models of change—to use only some of the most typical characterizations—are being increasingly challenged (e.g., Pennycook, 1989; Ramani, 1987). What is equally important, however, is that alternative models for critical inquiry and systematic change are being produced.

The view of the teacher as the source of meaningful change in language teaching is being reflected more and more in materials aimed at teacher self-development. Viewing "critical enquiry as the basis for effective action" (p. x), Candlin and Widdowson (1987) introduce their *Language Teaching: A Scheme for Teacher Education* series by asserting that advances in language teaching stem from the independent efforts of teachers in their own classrooms. This independence is not brought about by imposing fixed ideas and promoting fashionable formulas. It can only occur where teachers, individually or collectively, explore principles and experiment with techniques.

Interesting developments along these lines are taking place in the area of supervision. In recent years, teachers, in small groups, sometimes with the overt support of their institution, are designing alternatives to the traditional (and long criticized) authoritarian, evaluation-oriented model of supervision. Instead, teachers are developing *collegial*, *challenge*, and *peer coaching* models, with an emphasis on mutual development, recognition of the importance of the contextual factors that shape teachers' actions and perceptions, and recognition of the importance of the process by which change is managed—in particular, a definition of development as a long-term, rather than a single-dose, proposition.

In other cases, the use of "outside experts," long a point of contention among many teachers, is being recast into a more collaborative form of professional interaction. One such arrangement involves presentation of an innovation by an expert, followed by a period of time during which the expert demonstrates, in the teachers' own classrooms, or observes the teachers themselves introduce the innovation in their own classrooms. This stage serves as the bridge to collaborative efforts by the outside expert and the teaching staff to discover how the innovation can be best implemented in that particular context. Must the innovation be adapted? Is it in fact desirable and feasible?

The *teacher-researcher movement*, which seeks to legitimize research conducted by teachers and to formulate standards for such research, is another case in point. Such research seems to respond to the view of Stenhouse (1975, p. 165) that education will be significantly improved only when a research tradition that is accessible to teachers is created. The increasing frequency with which reports of action research appear in professional journals serving both the research and teaching communities; discussions of the ways in which researchers and teachers can collaborate effectively and equitably; the general trend to legitimize the teacher's perspective and to move that perspective from the periphery to center stage; these are all promising signals of a trend toward legitimizing, toward recognizing the authority of teachers' perceptions— about what problems merit attention, about how those problems

can best be explored, and about how to assess and act upon the insights that are gained. Indeed, the very notion of action, or problem-driven (as opposed to theory-driven) research is interpr20 etive in character: participants make meaning of their own situations, and the end point of such inquiry is labeled a "solution" only when and if it is perceived as such by those who have undertaken the inquiry and who stand to benefit from viewing it as such.

4. **We can make it a professional priority to explore the process by which teachers adopt and adapt innovations. What are the factors that encourage individual teachers and groups of teachers to accept innovations? What are the factors that lead them to reject particular innovations out of hand?**

If we are receptive to problem-driven inquiry, we must ask whether the outcomes of such inquiry can be understood as conforming to any particular set of principles or patterns that govern the process of innovation. Here, as elsewhere, we can only hope that before we try to reinvent the wheel, we continue to explore how *diffusion research*—that is, research on the nature and spread of innovations—might provide insight into our own work (e.g., Markee, 1989; White, 1988). Among the many aspects of the production and spread of innovations, diffusion research has documented the conflict that often exists between research and development agencies, which often seek to reduce the possibility that a particular innovation can be adapted to local needs and preferences (thereby, in their view, mantaining quality control), and the desire of those who adopt an innovation to customize it for local conditions. Research on this issue suggests the importance, for educational settings, of the opportunity for adaptation (*reinvention*) of an innovation. One national survey in the U.S. found that when an educational innovation was reinvented by a school, its adoption was more, rather than less, likely to be continued.

Rogers (1983) suggests a number of reasons why reinvention, or modification of an innovation, is likely to occur: the complexity of the innovation itself; lack of knowledge about the

innovation; the nonspecific nature of an innovation; the need to solve a wide range of problems with the same innovation; and the desire to claim local pride of ownership of the innovation. This last reason, by the way, may be related to the feeling voiced by the teacher described by O'Neill (1982).

However we encourage the move to understand the classroom teacher as the critical ingredient in change, it is important to be sure about the meaning of change that shapes our perceptions. In particular, we need to avoid the error of equating critical reflection with change. Language teaching has been plagued for much of the last few decades by the fashion-industry mentality (or what by others has been labeled a positivist bias). We view change as inherently desirable, as clear evidence of a desire on the part of teachers to improve their classroom performance.

It may well be that the product of critical reflection by a teacher will be a stronger committment to continue previous practice. This decision may stem from any number of reasons. It may well be that an innovation is rejected, not because it is an innovation, but because the cost of implementing it is judged to be greater than the instructional benefits it is likely to provide. Alternatively, a teacher may decide that the innovation is incompatible with his or her teaching style. Still another possibility is the perception by a teacher that his or her adoption of an innovation will be perceived, not as an attempt to improve classroom performance, but as an attempt to distinguish himself or herself from colleagues, and will threaten professional equilibrium. Furthermore, change may be taking place even when we see no visible effects. Change, then, can take place not simply by doing things differently, but in a number of other ways: adopting a new perspective, becoming open to future possibilities for change, developing an incipient sense of unease about the rightness of what one has been doing day after day.

What is true in other arenas is true in language teaching as well: we cannot nurture self-determination on the part of teachers—nor can we nurture decision making initiative, or criti-

cal reflection, or problem-posing, or any of the other things bound up in this trend—if we are only willing to accept the changes that we ourselves would like to see them make. This points to a new balancing act that those who are responsible in one way or another for teacher development will have to perform: to nurture decision-making by teachers without abandoning altogether their role as supervisors, applied linguists, and teaching specialists. Perhaps we will need to define our role differently: instead of causing change to take place, to aim rather at activating what Prabhu (1990) calls the teacher's "sense of plausibility." There are many factors that work to paralyze a teacher's sense of plausibility, and it is these factors—an examination system, limited classroom contact time, pressure to conform to tradition—that are often the beginning and end points of discussions of teachers and teaching.

I would argue that this need not be the case. Without ignoring the reality of these factors, without minimizing the constraints they impose, we can nevertheless find room, in any setting, for a teacher's sense of plausibility to expand. There are many ways to look forward. To identify trends that are already evident to many others and to predict that these trends will continue is an activity that involves little risk. On the other hand, to identify various threads in the fabric of our professional concerns and to demonstrate that these are the signs of a trend that has yet to emerge fully is obviously a more difficult activity, one in which there is a strong possibility of being wrong.

However, there is a further problem: how do we distinguish between the act of prediction—that is, foreseeing what is likely to engage the attention or animate the thinking of our field as whole—and prescription. In other words, how do we indicate our professional agenda for the years to come? How do we recognize a trend in the making from one that we simply wish to create? Are developments such as those I have mentioned as deep as they appear to be wide-ranging?

Is the increased attention to the teacher, not (as was the case in the past) as the only key player in the classroom, but as the most promising agent of change in language teaching, a direction

for the 1990s? How do we know if we are looking at a trend, or only at a current fashion? As Naisbitt (1984) has argued, a *trend* is fundamentally different from a *fad*. Fads are top-down phenomena; they are highly visible and easily identified with highly visible individuals and institutions. They must be easy to package, and they aim at creating the illusion that everyone benefits by following the lead and that no one really wants to be left behind. Fads, then, must create their own momentum. A trend, on the other hand, can only be discerned after it has already gained some momentum, since a trend is a grassroots movement; its momentum comes from horizontal spread, from teacher to teacher, from institution to institution.

In looking back, and around, and forward, more and more ELT professionals view it as both desirable and possible for teachers to re-establish and to extend, in a fundamental way, the primacy of their perceptions and expertise in instructional decision making. The authority of any teacher, or of any group of teachers, is of course not without limits. But within those limits, teachers, in whatever setting they work, seem to have within their reach the "historic moment": the opportunity to acknowledge the legitimacy of their perceptions; to abandon the role of passive consumer of the expertise of others—indeed, to question, as perhaps they have never had confidence to do before, the very model on which notions of "expertise" are based; and to keep their sense of plausibility (to use Prabhu's phrase again) as alive as possible. Should this happen, the 1990s will be an exciting and fruitful decade for all of us.

This is a revised and retitled version of a paper presented at the 1990 Jalt Convention in Omiya.

Stephen Gaies, of the University of Northern Iowa, is a visiting professor in the TESOL Program, Temple University Japan. He was editor of the *TESOL Quarterly* from 1984 to 1989.

References

Bourne, J. (1988). "Natural acquisition" and a "masked pedagogy." *Applied Linguistics, 9*, 83-99.

Burnaby, B., & Sun, Y. (1988). Chinese teachers' views of Western language teaching: Context informs paradigms. *TESOL Quarterly, 22*, 219-238.

Candlin, C., & Widdowson, H. (1987). Introduction: Language teaching: A scheme for teacher education. In Wright, T., *Roles of teachers & learners* (pp. x-xi). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Forster, E. M. (1910). *Howard's end*. London: Edward Arnold.

Fried-Booth, D. (1982). Project work with advanced classes. *ELT Journal, 36*, 98-103.

Markee, N. (1989). *The use of student journals as evaluative tools for the management of language education-related innovation*. Unpublished manuscript.

Montgomery, C., & Eisenstein, M. (1985). Real reality revisited: An experimental communicative course in ESL. *TESOL Quarterly, 19*, 317-334.

Naisbitt, J. (1984). *Megatrends: Ten new directions transforming our lives*. New York: Warner Books.

Newmark, L. (1966). How not to interfere with language learning. *International Journal of American Linguistics, 32*(1, Pt. 2), 77-83.

O'Neill, R. (1982). In defense of textbooks. *ELT Journal, 36*, 104-111.

Pennycook, A. (1989). The concept of method, interested knowledge, and the politics of language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly, 23*, 589-618.

Prabhu, N. S. (1990). There is no best method—Why? *TESOL Quarterly, 24*, 161-176.

Ramani, E. (1987). Theorizing from the classroom. *ELT Journal, 41*, 3-11.

Richards, J. (1990). *The language teaching matrix*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rogers, E. M. (1983). *Diffusion of innovations* (3rd ed.). New York: Academic Press.

Sampson, G. P. (1984). Exporting language teaching methods from Canada to China. *TESOL Canada Journal, 1* (1), 19-31.

Stenhouse, L. (1975). *An introduction to curriculum research and development*. London: Heinemann.

Swaffar, J., Arens, K., & Morgan, M. (1982). Teacher classroom practices: Redefining method as task hierarchy. *Modern Language Journal, 66*, 24-33.

Taylor, B. P. (1982). In search of real reality. *TESOL Quarterly 16*, 29-42.

White, R. V. (1988). *The ELT curriculum: Design, innovation and management*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.