

RADICAL TEFL¹

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1. “*Radical*”: “forming the root, basis or foundation ... going to the roots” (New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1993); “proceeding from or going to the root” (Chambers English Dictionary, 1988, CUP)

RADICAL TEFL

A forum for exploring and developing understanding of how knowledge of the TEFL classroom encounter grows, and for applying second-order thinking to EFLT

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Publishing Editor: Alistair L. Maclean

CALL FOR ARTICLES

Please see pages 10 and 11

CALL FOR COLLABORATORS

Offers of help welcome for editorial responsibilities of commissioning and editing articles, and for distribution and finance.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

After studying Physics, Chemistry and Philosophy, Alistair Maclean taught Mathematics in a secondary school. In the early 1980s he was a research student with Christopher Brumfit, and tried unsuccessfully to apply Philosophy to EFLT. He taught EFL in Belgium and Poland, and worked in pre-service and in-service teacher education. He was editor of the Polish Teacher Trainer (1993-1995, 10 issues published). Recently, he taught *Theory of Knowledge* on the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme.

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EDITORIAL

WHY “*RADICAL TEFL*”?

A visitor to a TEFL Conference from another field – for example, History, Physics, or the social sciences – might observe: “*We have given a lot of thought to how our field grows its knowledge, and develops ways of verifying claims to knowledge. Where is your debate on this?*” EFL teaching arguably lacks a similar systematic discussion about tools both for its investigations leading to new knowledge, and tools for the verification of knowledge. As a result of this lack, claims to understanding of the EFL classroom encounter are often left unchallenged, and undebated.

However, Michael Swan has started this debate for EFLT. Since the publication of his article “*A Critical Look at the Communicative Approach*”, many teachers have agreed with him that objections can be made to both the thinking behind Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and to the claims made by it. In further articles Swan developed his criticisms².

Swan’s significance for the exploration of how EFLT makes claims to knowledge about the classroom encounter, the review on page 4 argues, is however not that he specifically challenges CLT, but that the issues he identifies, concerning the claims and assumptions of CLT, are the same issues which other fields of enquiry have explored, as entry points to establishing foundations for growing their knowledge, and EFLT can therefore learn from these fields. Some main issues are: sources of evidence; the trustworthiness of claims; identification of unsupported assumptions; and verification mechanisms for claims to knowledge.

I believe that a forum for EFLT is needed where these rather abstract ideas could be debated further, as other fields have done. The title chosen, *Radical TEFL*, does not imply “left-wing”, but rather “going to the roots”. *Radical TEFL* will be interested in, firstly, publishing articles and reviews which explore the growth of knowledge for EFLT. Secondly, we would like to publish “reports from the classroom”, as EFLT pedagogy is under-represented in the TEFL literature, and it is only what happens in the classroom that can verify – or falsify - new claims to knowledge about the classroom encounter.

The TEFL and Applied Linguistics literature rarely cites publications from the Philosophy of Education or the Philosophy of Science, yet it is these fields which deal with how knowledge grows. *Radical TEFL* would like to publish work drawn from these branches of Philosophy, applied to TEFL. This project would open up a new field: “The Philosophy of EFLT”. By doing this, EFLT can help protect itself from other orthodoxies or ideologies in the future becoming predominant.

Alistair Maclean

² These articles are collected in Swan, M, *Thinking about language teaching*, 2012, OUP. The collection includes *A Critical Look at the Communicative Approach* (1985)

PHILOSOPHY, COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING, AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MICHAEL SWAN'S "*THINKING ABOUT LANGUAGE TEACHING*"³

Alistair L. Maclean

1. PHILOSOPHY AND ASKING QUESTIONS

Most people believe that philosophy is not for them. However, philosophy – carefully delimited - plays a similar role to mathematics – it is a collection of tools and methods, which are not difficult to use, and which can be applied to specific problems, and anyone can do a little philosophy just as anyone can do some maths. Philosophy uses questions as its main tool, not to get information however, but to try and get underneath a problem. One of the most powerful and subversive questions which can be asked, for example, is "*What do you mean by X?*", where "X" is a concept used in talking about a field of enquiry, for example:

- "*What do you mean by teaching?*"⁴
- "*What do you mean by learning?*"
- "*What do you mean by English?*"

The power of such questions is that we quickly see that the meaning is not so obvious as perhaps thought, and we are immediately taken down to another level.

Some more questions relevant to the EFLT classroom encounter might be:

- "*How can claims to knowledge about the classroom encounter be checked?*"
- "*Why are checking and feedback mechanisms needed?*"
- "*What assumptions does a teacher make in everyday teaching, and can these assumptions be relied on?*"
- "*Language is social, so must a classroom be social?*"

This kind of searching questioning, common in other fields, is unusual in EFLT.

2. ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT CLAIMS AND ASSUMPTIONS IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Michael Swan, gadfly of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), likes to ask questions. Examples of the questions that Swan asks are:

- "*Where is the evidence that "traditional" methods fail?*"
- "*Where is the evidence that CLT does a better job than pre-CLT in teaching EFL?*"

³ Swan, M. (2012) *Thinking About Language Teaching*, OUP (A collection of articles first published between 1985 and 2011, see papers 1, 2, 6, 8 especially, 9, 10, and 13).

⁴ Hirst, P. (1971), *What is Teaching?*, for example, in Peters (1973)

Many of the questions that Swan asks are extremely awkward for those who believe that CLT and Task-Based Instruction have solved the problems of how to teach and learn a language. Swan's questions are philosophical – that is, not asking for information, but trying to get beneath a claim. This is “second-order” thinking (first-order thinking is concerned with facts, and second-order thinking is concerned with how first-order thinking works). Swan often works in three stages:

- (1) Asks for research evidence for an explicit claim made by CLT
- (2) Finds that there is no evidence for the claim
- (3) Concludes that the claim is either explicit, and is unsupported by evidence, or is implicit, and is made in the form of an unstated assumption.

Identification of assumptions is a main function of philosophy, and this work is important because if an assumption is faulty, then so will be the arguments, and practice, built on it. Assumptions also can very easily be accepted as truths – because if they are not stated, they are usually not challenged. Swan gives a lot of attention to the assumptions underlying CLT.

To cite one CLT claim which Swan argues is not based on evidence, it is said that students need to be taught ‘strategies’ for reading and listening, because these ‘strategies’ are used by native speakers. This is both an explicit claim, but also implicit in the unstated assumption it relies on. The explicit part of the claim is that teaching strategies is more efficient than not teaching strategies – for which, however, Swan points out, there is no research evidence. The implicit claim is the unstated and so unexamined assumption that the student is unable to transfer his first-language strategies to English for himself (Swan 1985 in Swan 2012:9-11).

This is just one example of Swan's searching thinking, based on his own teaching and materials writing experience.

I want to argue that Swan, perhaps unknowingly, has drawn on philosophy in his work. Philosophy (in the English-speaking ‘analytic’ tradition, which draws directly from Socrates and the Ancient Greeks), is as a matter of strategy critical in its work, not accepting what others have said until reasoning and concepts have been scrutinised. Philosophy in this role is not concerned with the content of the knowledge being discussed, nor its conclusions, but simply with the *process* of arguing towards a conclusion. This scrutinising role of Philosophy also acts as a check on claims – it is a feedback mechanism. The early work of Chris Brumfit is perhaps the closest EFLT and Applied Linguistics have come to making use of philosophy (Brumfit 1978 and chapter 1 of Brumfit 1984). Wallace (1991) also works in this tradition.

Questioning, in the sense that it leads to unravelling, is also an entry point to clarifying many problems, confusions, claims, assumptions and mistakes in thinking. Close questioning can reveal problems with claims to knowledge, for example by pointing out contradictions (Brumfit 1983 as an example), or finding that a concept is not based on evidence, or that it simply doesn't stand up to reality when tested in the classroom

In “*Thinking about Language Teaching*”, Swan identifies and then challenges many other claims and assumptions which CLT relies on, for example:

- “*older language courses failed to teach meaning, or equip students with the ability to do things with language*” (2012: 15)
- “*that learners really want the degree of autonomy that some teachers think is good for them*”

Swan asks us to see that, firstly, many of the concepts used in CLT are not clear, and secondly, that some of the claims of CLT are not based on evidence but on assumptions which, because they have not been brought out into the open, are often simply accepted. He points out that sometimes what is only an unsubstantiated claim or hypothesis can easily harden into an accepted body of facts or ‘dogma’, and into a new teaching orthodoxy (2012;111/112).

Here are some more claims and assumptions sometimes made in CLT which Swan explores:

- “*That teaching of form excludes teaching of meaning* (2012:3-6)
- *The theoretical assumptions behind Task Based Instruction* (Swan 2005)
- “*That learners learn by interacting with each other* (2012: 104)

The whole thinking behind CLT is, in Swan’s word, ‘*a muddle*’. To be fair to CLT, one reason that the thinking around it often seems muddled is perhaps because CLT ideas became influential in about 1980, at the same time as three other influential ideas appeared: the notional-functional syllabus (and the conflation of syllabus and method which this led to); humanist learning theories (some contradictions here identified by Brumfit 1983); and learner-centredness. It would be for a historian of ideas, with a background in EFLT to disentangle the overlapping strands between these ideas – but where would such a scholar be found?

3. FALSE DICHOTOMIES

Swan’s searching scrutiny also catches false dichotomies lurking beneath the surface of CLT. A false dichotomy is to posit two concepts in an either-or way, not allowing for a third or middle way. To then argue on the basis of a false dichotomy is unsound, as the argument which follows depends on the soundness of the presumed dichotomy – but there are seldom simple either-or dichotomies in language learning. An example of a false dichotomy would be for example the option “to translate or not to translate” However, there is, of course a middle way, which is to use translation sometimes.

Another false dichotomy example is to posit a structural syllabus against a functional syllabus (Swan:2012: 17). Theory building (in Universities), and then applying that theory (in the classroom) is another false dichotomy (see Widdowson 2003). False dichotomies can be explicit, or implicit. Another false dichotomy is to posit past methods of second language teaching against current methods. Swan writes that faulty thinking makes language teaching “*vulnerable to shifts in intellectual fashion*”, and also proposes the remedy:

“*Language Teaching has swung back between opposed dichotomies. Surely the need is – give that each has something valuable – integration?*” (2012: 111)

Second-order questioning leads to dialogue. Philosophy has a conversation with its own past, and does not forget its past, and encourages debate, requiring a familiarity with past ideas. This is needed because there are no real new issues in Philosophy. Arguably, because of the lack of collective memory in EFLT, and lack of questioning and debate, in the history of EFLT, at each change of orthodoxy, the past was *not* integrated into new understanding of the learning process. (See Swan 2005 and Swan 2006 in Swan 2012). Post-1980 EFLT thinking does not really acknowledge or have a debate with pre-1980 thinking. These insights belongs to a study of how EFLT writes its history, and learns from it.

Many people, asked what philosophy does, would point to its negative role – of identifying mistakes in reasoning and thinking. Swan doesn't hesitate to do this concerning CLT, for example he identifies the following mistakes in thinking:

- The overgeneralisation of a limited but valuable insight (Swan2012: 7)
- Allowing a hypothesis to be considered as proven (2012: 111)
- Setting up a target and attacking it unfairly (2012: 99)
- Arguing by polarisation (2012: 24), this related to false dichotomies
- Misrepresenting the current of thought it claims to replace (2012:2)

Why should these mistakes be important? Because

*“theoretical confusion can lead to practical inefficiency” (2012: 13), and
“a plausible hypothesis can transmute into ideology” (2012: 111/2).*

4. DISCUSSION AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SWAN'S WORK

4.1 At one level, and from the point of view of teaching and syllabus design, the significance of Swan's work is that he argues for a return to teaching grammar, which offers a balance to ideas on communicative teaching. By pointing out that there is no evidence against the use of grammar and 'traditional' methods and syllabuses, in 1985 Swan tried to reopen the debate on course design, grading and selection of materials, and in this sense he is a link with the past, and draws on the past, as in for example his revisiting of contrastive analysis.⁵

4.2 However, the debate concerning the place of grammar in EFLT belongs to first-order discussion. Another implication of Swan's thinking belongs to second-order thinking, as follows: if we look at the way in which Swan has challenged the EFLT orthodoxy, we see it is in fact by using the tools of philosophy (or more precisely, epistemology), that is by questioning; challenging arguments; asking for evidence for claims; and identifying hypotheses which have been regarded as 'proven' – that lies the first philosophical significance of Swan's work.

The significance of Swan in a deeper sense is therefore not his specific insights and scrutiny, but the way in which he does this work. It was claimed at the beginning of

⁵ Swan, M, (1985) A Critical Look at the Communicative Approach, in Swan (2012), articles 1 and 2; Also article 7 in Swan (2012), The influence of the mother tongue on second language vocabulary acquisition and use, and article 13 (Swan 2007b), History is not what happened: the case of Contrastive Analysis. A follow-up to Claire Kramsch's review of Linguistics Across Cultures

this review that doing philosophy, or second-order thinking, is open to anyone who wants to apply the methods and tools of philosophy. Swan has done exactly this, and so a further significance of his work is that, if he can do it, then so can others, because no special knowledge of the second language acquisition literature is required to reveal that something is wrong in arguments used, or to identify unstated assumptions, false dichotomies and mistakes in reasoning.

Interestingly, possibly only someone who is both teacher and materials writer could have raised so many questions concerning CLT, as it is only *by* teaching and *by* writing materials that questions such as he asks are provoked.

Swan is not the first person to apply second-order thinking and concepts from methods of enquiry to EFLT (for example, see Brumfit, *passim*), but he is perhaps the first person to make a link between these issues (i.e. concerning methods of enquiry), to classroom practice and materials writing.

4.3 A further significance of Swan's work lies in what he brings back to EFLT (and which disappeared at about the time sociolinguistics arguably colonised EFLT in the early 1980s), which is that he has reintroduced pedagogy. In his arguments he points out that many ideas from Applied Linguistics and researchers are not only not based on evidence, but that they are incompatible with sound educational principles (as taught on PGCE/PGDE courses⁶, for example.)

To cite some examples:

- he argues for teaching from objectives (Swan: 2012: 58);
- he writes of the need for 'bricks' or laying foundations in learning a language (2012: 64);
- he asks for strategies to be classified by measurable targets (2012: 64).
- against some current thinking, he argues for the place of 'training', as in mechanical practice,
- he reminds us of the importance of keeping student level in mind; and
- he emphasises the importance of input (2012: 138).

4.4 Further, he questions the relevance and role of 'pragmatics' in the EFL classroom.⁷

4.5 Finally, one could assess Swan's significance at a deeper level, which takes into account the way in which fields of enquiry grow, and which draws on the Philosophy of Science: Fields of enquiry (for example, traditional school and higher education subjects such as the pure sciences, the social sciences, History) normally grow their knowledge by a combination of empirical research, and by reflection on that research (empiricism followed by a rationalist stage). This work leads to claims to new knowledge, and in this way knowledge can grow. However, two basic

⁶ PGCE/PGDE: Post-graduate certificate/diploma in education

⁷ Article 14 in Swan (2012), Grammar, Meaning and Pragmatics: Sorting out the Muddle (Swan 2007a) and (Swan 2012)

principles of this process are that claims must be supported by evidence (which the empirical stage provides), and that there must be some processes of both checking arguments and scrutinising the empirical stage (these two processes make up the rationalist work).

The significance of this is that if the claims of a field of enquiry are not based on reliable evidence – as Swan argues concerning CLT – and if the rationalist work is flawed, then the foundations of that field are insecure. By pointing out where evidence for CLT claims is questionable, and by also identifying faults in CLT rationalist reasoning (this especially including working from unsupported assumptions), Swan has done TEFL a service. His collection of articles is philosophy (especially validation), and second-order thinking, applied to CLT. Using these instruments, he has shown that some of the stronger forms of the current EFLT orthodoxy have faulty foundations.

The way to avoid a repetition of this situation is for EFLT and Applied Linguistics to begin a debate on the methodology it employs to grow knowledge of the classroom encounter, as this project which would help second-language teaching construct securer foundations. To do this, it needs the help of Philosophy.

January 2014

NOTE

This electronic version is slightly different from the print version, with some corrections and minor amendments.

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CALL FOR ARTICLES AND BOOK REVIEWS⁸
RADICAL TEFL WOULD LIKE TO PUBLISH ARTICLES AND
REVIEWS UNDER ANY OF THE FOLLOWING HEADINGS:
(Deadline for receiving first drafts for the next issue is 30 September 2014)

SCRUTINY OF PRESENT IDEAS IN EFLT

- analysis of concepts used in the EFLT literature (in the tradition of linguistic philosophy and the philosophy of education as by Paul Hirst and R S Peters⁹)
- discussion of books or articles which scrutinise current orthodoxies in EFLT
- scrutiny of claims made in the EFL literature which are either not based on evidence, and/or which are based on unstated or unsupported assumptions
- exploration of dichotomies used in the EFL literature, especially false dichotomies
- critical scrutiny and/or reappraisal of the place of sociolinguistics, linguistics and pragmatics in understanding the classroom encounter, and scrutiny of humanist language learning and learner-centredness;
- identification and exploration of “taboos” and “should-nots” in EFLT, both contemporary, and in EFLT history, with lessons to draw
- discussion, with examples, of the idea that “education is at the end of theory”¹⁰

GROWTH OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE EFL CLASSROOM ENCOUNTER

- qualitative investigation on the EFL classroom encounter, by researchers or teachers, with some critical discussion and/or reflection on research methods used, with implications suggested for future similar investigations
- especially from teachers, reports of testing a hypothesis or teaching idea in the classroom, with critical discussion of research methods used, including limitations with implications for future teaching or materials writing
- studies on the psychology or psychopathology of teaching
- explorations (not empirical studies) of why students fail to learn EFL
- attempts to understand the EFL classroom encounter in terms of the relationship between student and materials
- attempts to adapt CLT and Task-based instruction for large classes and/or poorly motivated students, with special reference to materials design
- explorations of the place of grammar in TEFL, including ‘grammar for communication’, and of the selection, grading and teaching of grammar (but not articles on grammar) (See Swan 2012)
- attempts to understand the classroom encounter beneath the level of observation, but however not drawing on sociolinguistics or twentieth-century post-modern thought (this treated in other publications)
- application of epistemology to school subjects¹¹
- replies to, and discussion of, Widdowson, HG (2003), *The Practice of Theory*, in *Defining Issues in Language Teaching*

⁸ Book reviews (or reviews of individual papers) do not need to be of recently published work

⁹ See Hirst, P, (1971) *What is Teaching*, in Peters, RS, ed, (1973), *The Philosophy of Education*, OUP. Also see Bailey, R, et al eds., *SAGE Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, (pages 30; 40-53; 329-332) Sage Publications, California

¹⁰ See Carr, W, (2006), *Education without Theory*, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 54/2

¹¹ See *Theory of Knowledge (TOK) Programme Guide*, available from IBO, with information at www.ibo.org (International Baccalaureate Organisation)

PEDAGOGY AND CLASSROOM REALITIES IN EFLT

- exploration or revisiting of pedagogical principles which are relevant to teaching and learning EFL (see Swan 2012)
- explorations and implications of conflation and confusion between syllabus and method in EFLT¹²
- explorations of the issue of power and/or control in the EFL classroom
- learning from pedagogy of other school subjects, and of methods of approaching EFL in other countries
- debate between teacher and researcher/academic, where teacher experience of classroom realities helps researcher to develop ideas

HISTORY OF EFLT

- the history of EFLT which recovers or revisits lost or neglected traditions
- reassessment of pre-1980 EFL literature, perhaps in the form of book reviews, which can contribute to an integration of past and present thinking
- a critical review of existing histories of TEFL
- a critical history of EFLT 1980-2012, or discussion of how such a history could be written, with reference to historiography literature¹³

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

- explorations of how knowledge of the EFL classroom encounter grows which draw on the philosophy of science and/or epistemology; explorations of the relevance of the ideas of Popper and Kuhn¹⁴
- critical studies of second-language research and its methods (especially of those drawing on reductionist methods of the natural sciences) and explorations of the alternative models of research already used in Education
- any contribution which can help EFLT establish foundations for itself, especially methods for the teacher to grow her knowledge and understanding of the EFL classroom encounter
- other studies attempting to apply second-order Philosophy (not post-modern or speculative Philosophy) to EFLT

GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES AND REVIEWS

The second issue of *Radical TEFL* will hopefully be published at Easter 2015, and will be on sale at the 2015 IATEFL Conference. Please send drafts of articles and reviews to the address given on the front inside cover of this issue, **by 30 September 2014**. Copyright of published articles will belong to authors. Articles and reviews should have a clear research question, and should try to get under the surface of the question treated. Articles are especially welcome from thoughtful teachers, and new authors, and which draw on and cite literature from outside of the Applied Linguistics, Sociolinguistics and EFLT literature. If required, help will happily be given in editing and producing final draft. Please submit drafts in the following format: on one-sided A4 paper, one-and-a-half spaced, 12 point.

¹² See as an example Brumfit, CJ, (1978), Review of Notional Syllabuses by David Wilkins, in *ELT Journal* 33/1

¹³ See any texts on historiography, which discusses issues of interpreting and writing history

¹⁴ See Brumfit CJ, Individual freedom in LT (pages 184-7).