

RADICAL TEFL¹

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grow her knowledge?** **Page 4**
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1. **“Radical”**: “forming the root, basis or foundation ... going to the roots” (New Oxford Shorter English Dictionary, 1993); “proceeding from or going to the root” (Chambers English Dictionary, 1988, Cambridge University Press)

RADICAL TEFL

An annual forum for probing concepts and assumptions in TEFL, and for exploring and developing understanding of the TEFL classroom encounter.

Issue Number 2 March 2015

Publishing Editor: Alistair L. Maclean

CALL FOR ARTICLES and GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Please see pages 3 and inside back cover

CALL FOR COLLABORATORS

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

FUTURE ISSUES

Issue Number 3 (Publication: March 2016)

Theme: "Thinking about teaching speaking"

(Articles for 30 September 2015). Please see pages 29/30

(On sale at IATEFL outside the conference venue)

Issue Number 4 (Publication March 2017)

Theme: "Researching and Investigating Student Failure to learn in the EFL secondary classroom"

(Articles for 30 September 2016)

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CALL FOR ARTICLES

(Please also see page 32)

No articles were received for this second issue of *Radical TEFL*, which makes it, for the moment, a one-man band. The next and third issue will have as a theme “*Thinking about Teaching Speaking*”. But what is ‘speaking’? What is ‘teaching’?

The fourth issue will take as a theme “*Researching and Investigating student failure to learn in the EFL Secondary Classroom*”. But what is ‘research’? Does it have to be based on observation and data? Why do some students fail to learn English? What is ‘to learn a language’? What is ‘learning’? How can we research failure? What can our students’ failures tell us?

I have started *Radical TEFL* on the premise that TEFL doesn’t ask enough questions, especially about its assumptions and foundation concepts used. Other fields of enquiry have found that probing into assumptions and concepts can lead to clarification, can generate more questions, and from that, fruitful understandings and approaches.

Here is Professor Donald McIntyre concluding an interesting article on research in education:

*“Our most serious problem ... may not be in the gap that divides teachers and researchers, but in their shared preconceptions. (He now quotes Graham Nuttall) ‘Much of what we do in schools and what we believe about teaching and learning is itself caught up in the same rituals and myths and sustains rather than challenges those prevailing beliefs’.”*²

If you find these ideas interesting, please think about contributing an article.

The article which follows argues that students’ problems and failures are a good starting point and opportunity for a teacher to grow her knowledge and understanding of the classroom encounter. So, *Radical TEFL* would like to publish short reports of lessons which DIDN’T WORK, and reflection on what was learned from failure. (Please see page 32.)

Alistair Maclean

² McIntyre, D (2005), *Bridging the gap between Theory and Practice*, Cambridge Journal of Education, 35/3.

How can a teacher grow her knowledge?

Alistair L. Maclean

***ABSTRACT:** Section One of this essay introduces two kinds of knowledge ('propositional knowledge', and 'practical knowledge'), and begins to consider their respective relevance for the teacher. Section Two describes the stages by which knowledge grows. Section Three discusses validation of claims to knowledge concerning the EFL classroom encounter. Section Four discusses some implications of the preceding discussion for understanding the EFL secondary school classroom encounter in terms of starting from student failure to learn speaking. The essay concludes by suggesting that the source disciplines of Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition Studies which inform EFLT, inasmuch as they propose 'propositional knowledge' to teachers and teaching materials, have disproportionately occupied the place in TEFL that belongs to the 'practical knowledge' of education.*

What might be the most helpful starting point for an isolated EFL secondary-school teacher to grow her knowledge and understanding of the classroom encounter? Can she draw on Applied Linguistics for Language Teaching (ALLT) and second language acquisition research (SLA), and the ideas of others, or should she work it out for herself? If the answer is 'a combination of these', how is this combination achieved? What kind of knowledge makes a good starting point for a teacher?

The EFL teachers who I have in mind teach in the state secondary school sector in Poland,³ and do not normally have the opportunities to attend courses long enough to help them consider how propositional knowledge (from the source disciplines of ALLT, SLA and sociology), which claims to inform EFLT, might relate to their teaching practice. They may, at most, attend an annual conference or workshop. Feedback from their practice – from trial and error – is their main source of

³ In my experience (I taught EFL in Polish secondary school for two years, from 2009 to 2011), Polish secondary classes are set in groups according to ability, and normally have a maximum size of 16 students (from 12/13 to 18/19 years), although these groups sometimes need to be taught together, giving mixed-level classes of up to 30 students. The strongest students invariably attend, or have attended, extra weekly or twice-weekly English classes in the late afternoon, in private language schools. Teachers, in my experience, in the final three years of school (lyceum) speak excellent English. School-leaving exams are not arranged nationally, but by individual schools (the 'matura'), in cooperation with a neighbouring school. About 20 secondary schools in Poland (including the one in which I taught) teach the International Baccalaureate Bilingual Diploma Programme, for entrance to UK universities. The Polish secondary teachers I worked with were rather isolated in their work, and staffroom conversation did not include discussion of teaching approaches. Similarly, teachers who I knew had insufficient time after school to do research. This essay starts, therefore, from that reality, and so considers how a teacher *in isolation* grows and can grow her knowledge and understanding of the classroom encounter.

information, and so it seems to follow that their main stimulus and opportunity for development lies in their classes and students.

The teacher's task therefore is arguably to understand and use this classroom-generated-information. The aim of this enquiry is to open up two related ways by which teachers can do this – by firstly focusing on students' problems (section four below), and secondly by paying more attention to pedagogy (section four and concluding section). I will argue that *practical or pedagogical knowledge* as developed by a teacher in response to a student's problems or failure is more appropriate for beginning to understand the classroom encounter than propositional knowledge claims (i.e. 'theory') drawn from disciplines which lie outside education. 'Practical knowledge' has sometimes been called process knowledge or procedural knowledge (by Michael Eraut), but I will not use this terminology.⁴

Although arguments have been made before in the TEFL literature for the value of practical knowledge over propositional knowledge (for example Lai 2003), I will try to take this argument further, with the help of epistemology, by exploring the underpinning of a teacher's knowledge⁵. I believe that such a probing approach can help us better understand the EFL classroom encounter, and by extension help teachers, and those who advise them, to see more clearly and understand more thoroughly their students' difficulties, problems and failures in attempting to learn to speak English. I try to ground the ideas discussed here by referring to the issue of student failure to learn to speak in the secondary classroom (Section 4).⁶

In a study of this kind there is a risk of conflating description (how things *are*) with prescription (how things *could be*). Section 2 below claims to be descriptive of how knowledge grows, and sections 3 and 4, deriving from section 2, are more prescriptive. Section 5.1 claims to be descriptive, and sections 5.2 and 5.3 are prescriptive. The footnotes try to set the argument offered in a deeper context. This essay does not consider issues in teacher research.

Much of what I argue here I have learned from teaching *Theory of Knowledge* ('TOK') in Poland, which is a 100-hour compulsory course given as part of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, and which explores how different school subjects grow their knowledge.

⁴ I do not want to argue that there is a clear division between propositional and practical knowledge, however, the distinction seems to be a useful working one, and has a long tradition in epistemology, from Aristotle through to Wilfred Carr and Paul Hirst.

⁵ By 'Epistemology' I mean 'Theory of the grounds of knowledge'. See Talisse (2008: 26-27).

⁶ This essay is the first part of a projected four-part enquiry into why students fail to learn to speak EFL in the secondary classroom. This first essay argues that the starting point for such an enquiry is to identify and understand classroom problem-situations. The second essay will try to understand the concept of teaching in the context of pedagogy and materials, drawing from Mathematics teaching. The third essay will enquire into what kind of investigation or research is required to address the main question of failure to learn. The fourth essay will turn to the learning process, and will enquire into what can be drawn from Mathematics teaching and learning.

SECTION ONE: KNOWLEDGE AND THE TEACHER

Our starting points are the questions: “*To what extent, and in what ways, can EFLT draw from source disciplines such as learning theory, social psychology and applied linguistics, which offer propositional knowledge in the form of generalised ‘knowledge claims’?*”⁷

1.1 Professor David Carr has summarised in general terms the reasons why teachers, as practitioners, cannot uncritically draw from other fields which offer the teacher propositional knowledge (which I label for convenience ‘theory’). Carr argues (Carr, David 2003: 53-58 and 123-31):⁸

- Exactly what studies might give theoretical input to effective educational practice? In the case of doctors, for example, it is much clearer than in the case of education what input they need from other disciplines. Whilst doctors directly *apply* their knowledge of anatomy, etc., in a technical sense, teachers however do not *apply* psychology, or sociology in a *direct* way (pp. 54 & 56).
- Generalisations stated in quantitative or statistical terms cannot capture or accommodate real-life pedagogical engagement, requiring contextualisation. The life of the classroom cannot be seen through empirical studies (54-55)
- Teachers need *ownership* of what they are doing, meaning they have to come to their own solutions. However, applying theory from outside is the opposite to having ownership, and is alienating (53)
- Conclusions from source disciplines are never definitive, and intellectual fashions can change but even if there were conclusive generalisations about the classroom, there is no guarantee that application of these insights would be in a general sense educationally sound. (55). The theory being applied may even be not only “*practically useless but theoretically mistaken*” (55-56). It is not enough to assume that even true claims (sic) have direct and inevitable consequences for educational practice.
- What is needed is knowledge, or generalisations, which understand action and which lead to action
- Concerning validation and mediation, since knowledge claims cannot, following a ‘post-modern’ consensus, be evaluated as true or false in some way, another main criterion of the validity of a knowledge claim is arguably: “**Does it work?**”. (Carr: 2003 pages 123-25)(See Sections 2.3 & 3.4 below.)

⁷ Paul Hirst (1966) has argued that different fields have different ‘**forms of knowledge**’, in other words, ‘knowledge’ is a ‘cluster concept’, with different meanings, which makes ‘knowledge’ a slippery word to use. It is not even clear that ‘knowledge as end-point’ can be separated from ‘knowledge as process’. In this essay, I use the word ‘knowledge’ in the sense of ‘understanding’, in the special sense of ‘seeing’ (section 2.3 below). See Eraut (1994: 14-17) for an exposition and discussion of the different ways in which the word ‘knowledge’ can be used by a teachers. Also see Hoyle & John (1995:45-59) on the different kinds of ‘knowledge’ which a teacher can employ. This essay however is not primarily interested in the question ‘What is knowledge?’, but rather ‘*How does knowledge grow in education?*’

⁸ David Carr is Professor Emeritus at the Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh.

Paul Hirst writes: (my emphasis)

*“the theories of science and the theories of practical activities are radically different in character, because they perform quite different functions, they are constructed to do different jobs... (For) the empirical sciences, theory ... expresses our understanding (and is) **the end point** of scientific investigation. Where a practical activity like education is concerned, the place of theory is not the end product, but rather it is constructed to determine and **guide the activity**” (Hirst, 1966:40)⁹*

and Wilfred Carr writes:

“ ... the peculiarities of practical knowledge - its embeddedness in practice and its inseparability from the concrete situation in which it is applied – means that it cannot be developed by a ‘theoretical science’ that yields generalisable or theoretical knowledge that can be applied universally ... ”. (Carr 2007: 280)¹⁰

Professor Martyn Hammersly (2013: 15-23) has also questioned how far ‘evidence-based research’ can help practitioners. In EFLT, Michael Wallace (1990: 8-17 & 52-55) has introduced criticisms of assumptions that an Applied Science model can be applied from source disciplines to EFLT.¹¹

If we follow these authorities just quoted, it follows that the idea that educational practice can draw from outside theory is highly problematic¹². In Section 3 below this problem will be addressed in the context of a discussion on ‘validation’.

1.2 The arguments above by Professors David Carr, Paul Hirst and Wilfred Carr (who all have a background in Philosophy as well as in Education) are presented by them in the deeper context of some issues in philosophy (epistemology), for example:

- there exist different kinds of knowledge, or forms of knowledge (this debate goes back to Aristotle)¹³

⁹ See: Hirst, PH, (1966), and Hirst, PH, ed., (1983), chs. 1 & 2; pp. 116-17. Paul Hirst was a secondary school mathematics teacher for five years, and from 1971 to 1988 Professor of Education at the University of Cambridge. He is arguably Britain’s most important and influential philosopher of education.

¹⁰ See Carr W, (1980). Wilfred Carr is best-known in TEFL for his (1986) with Stephen Kemmis, and for the underpinning which this book offers for Action Research. However, Carr & Kemmis offer much more than a justification for Action Research: Especially see the first four chapters for its discussion of the epistemology of teaching and teacher research. Wilfred Carr was Professor of Education at the University of Sheffield (1994 to 2009).

¹¹ For a shorter statement of the problem of a teacher drawing from source disciplines, see Hoyle & John (1995: ch. 3). See also McIntyre (2005).

¹² Does a practical activity such as ‘teaching’ require consciously formulated guidelines, as provided by ‘source disciplines’? Gilbert Ryle does not think so: *“There are many classes of performance in which intelligence is displayed, but the rules or criteria of which are unformulated.”* (From *The Concept of Mind* (1949), page 30, quoted by Israel Scheffler in *Conditions of Knowledge* (1963), p.96, University of Chicago Press.

- is knowledge ‘out there’? Is knowledge made, or ‘constructed’ by individuals?¹⁴
- how exactly can knowledge which is used for a *practical activity* draw on a theoretical corpus of knowledge?
- Can the *growth* of knowledge be separated from practice, or action?¹⁵ How does knowledge grow? (Section 2 below)
- are different kinds of knowledge validated (justified) in different ways? (Section Three below)

1.3 Discussion. Theory embedded in teaching materials

In this sub-section, I will continue to assume that there are two kinds of knowledge for a teacher:

- **firstly** ‘theory’ in Hirst’s sense as quoted above of ‘*endpoints of investigation*’ (the theory proposed to teachers by ALLT and SLA), which are ‘propositional knowledge claims’, and
- **secondly** ‘practical knowledge’, which for Hirst ‘*guides the activity*’. I will assume below (following McIntyre (2005:358-60), that practical knowledge, for a teacher, is pedagogy.

Although secondary teachers may not be specifically asked to apply theory (i.e. propositional knowledge claims) from source disciplines, however *the materials* they use normally have imbedded into them some theories and knowledge claims from the research and the investigations of others, and so in effect theories from source disciplines are in this way introduced into the classroom encounter - theory which is based on explicit claims or implicit assumptions both about language, and about how acquiring a language take place. From about 1960 to 1980, for example, the prevailing theory about language was that it was a generative system, and learning theory was behaviourist, and these two theories were designed into language teaching materials

If a teacher is required to use a specified coursebook, this means that she must effectively use any theory (propositional knowledge) which is embedded in these materials. She cannot reject the theories embedded in the coursebook, nor easily replace them with her own theories (whether her own propositional knowledge, or ‘practical knowledge’). However, the situation is even more constraining than this for the teacher, because materials are at the interface of both:

¹³ See Saugstad, T (2005) for a clear exposition of Aristotle’s ‘practical philosophy’ which is an underpinning both for the problem addressed here, as well as for work by Michael Eraut (1986, 1992, 1994).

¹⁴ See Barbara Jaworski, *Investigating Mathematics Teaching: A Constructivist Enquiry*, (1994, Falmer Press), chs. 2 & 11, for a discussion of constructivism in Mathematics Education. I am not aware of a similar discussion in the ALLT, SLA or TEFL literature. Also see Glaserfeld (1995: chs. 2 & 10)

¹⁵ On the differences between ‘theory’ and ‘action’ as distinct kinds of knowledge, see for example Colin McGinn (1982, 1st ed., pp. 81-83), *The Character of Mind*. OUP.

- *what* to teach (the language, vocabulary and so on to be introduced), and
- *how* to teach (pedagogical principles)

A teacher may find that the materials she is asked to teach from are incompatible with the pedagogical principle, for example, of prioritising foundations, because the materials may have designed into them ideas from sociolinguistics, and the teacher may find that this content, present in materials, distracts her students from constructing foundations. (See Swan 2012: articles 4 & 6, and Hirst (1974a: 3-4). Materials thus, in that they have embedded in them propositional knowledge, can for the teacher present a conflict with her pedagogy.¹⁶

In this way, the presence of ‘propositional knowledge’ in materials can prevent the teacher from her applying practical knowledge (i.e. pedagogy) which she might believe should be primary. In my own teaching I solved this problem by normally writing my own materials, however, writing materials will not be an option for most secondary teachers.

The above discussion suggests that what is required are published materials which allow the teacher space to introduce her own understanding of what constitutes good practical knowledge (i.e. pedagogy). If this can be done, and if the teacher is thereby empowered to apply pedagogy (practical knowledge), she can then avoid the imposition of propositional knowledge, through the medium of materials. She will have increased the amount of practical knowledge in her work, and decreased the amount of externally proposed ‘propositional knowledge’. Pedagogy (practical knowledge) will as a result, as it arguably should, take precedence over theory (propositional knowledge).

This is achieved, for example, in many traditional secondary Mathematics textbooks, by providing an over-abundance of examples and exercises (at different levels of difficulty), allowing the teacher to select work for students according to her preferred style of teaching, and according to the needs, and learning styles and speeds, of small groups of students, and even of individual students.

1.4 The question as to how far educational practices can draw from “source disciplines” was extensively discussed within the philosophy of education from about 1970 to 1995,¹⁷ however, work done on this in the philosophy of education was

¹⁶ I am not aware of a full discussion in the ALLT, SLA or TEFL literature which probes the concept of pedagogy. However, see: Ellis, R & Shintani, N (2014), *Exploring Pedagogy through Second Language Acquisition*, Routledge, pp 39-44; and also see Richards, J (2007), *Materials Development and Research: towards a form-focused perspective*. In Lotos, S. & Nassaji (eds)(2007), *Studies in Honour of Rod Ellis*, OUP. On the importance and difficulties of carrying out conceptual analysis in Education see: Scriven, M (1988) *Philosophical Inquiry Methods in Education* (esp. pp. 136-144) in Jaeger PM (ed), *Complementary Methods for Research in Education*, pub. American Educational Research Association. EFLT arguably lacks a tradition which applies the philosophical method of conceptual analysis (see Scriven just cited).

¹⁷ Other important British philosophers of education who have addressed this question are Richard Pring (Pring 2004), RS Peters (Hirst & Peters 1970) and Robin Barrow (Barrow 1975, 2006). RS Peters was

not taken up in the EFLT and ALLT literature (although see Brumfit [1984 ch.1]. This means that there exists a whole field of approaches concerning education for EFLT to draw on, particularly the relation of education and teaching to source disciplines. The limitations of the ‘source disciplines approach’ as summarised in section 1.1 above have been known about for over 20 years but, taken only by themselves, these criticisms do not lead to a deeper understanding either of the classroom encounter or of the student’s difficulties.¹⁸ The sections which follow attempt to provide the underpinnings of such an understanding.

1.5 The arguments which I have cited and discussed in Section One can be summarised as follows: Propositional knowledge (as offered to EFLT by ALLT and SLA) should be aware of its limitations for informing teaching. Teachers, for their part, should inspect what is offered by source disciplines very carefully, and be aware of these limitations, and consider how they can develop their own ‘practical knowledge, that is, pedagogy. In Section Four below, I discuss how a teacher can find a way to introduce pedagogy. However, this discussion requires an underpinning. I turn to this now in Section Two.¹⁹

SECTION TWO

THE GROWTH OF KNOWLEDGE AND STARTING FROM PROBLEMS²⁰

2.1 I will now consider the question of the growth of knowledge in general terms, before, in sections 3 and 4 below, grounding two implications, which arise (namely the need for validation procedures, and the need to start from problems) to the growth of knowledge in TEFL.

Does there exist a universal pattern for the growth of knowledge? I propose, drawing on work by John Dewey (as summarised in Talisse 2008: 18-19; 21-24 & especially p. 120), Michael Polanyi and Karl Popper, that the growth of knowledge across all academic fields normally includes at least the following three stages:

1. A problem, or *problem-situation*, or ‘puzzle’ (discussed below), which leads to a conjecture (or hypothesis) and/or to a research question;²¹

Professor of Education at the London University Institute of Education, and Professor Richard Pring was Director of the Department of Educational Studies at the University of Oxford (1989 to 2003).

¹⁸ The problem is clearly stated in Blake, N et al (1998: pp. 1-6).

¹⁹ Issues raised above have been discussed in *TESOL Quarterly*, in particular by Donald Freeman, to which I do not have access.

²⁰ This essay does not consider how knowledge is grown by *a research community* (as discussed for example by TS Kuhn and in Ziman (1968 & 1978), but rather how an individual, for example a teacher, *in isolation*, grows her knowledge (footnote on page 1 above). Consequently, the work of TS Kuhn is not cited here.

²¹ See Popper 1963a and Popper 1963b. For Sir Karl Popper, new knowledge starts from problems, although his main interest was the validation stage. Polanyi was more interested in the first stage (the ‘discovery’ stage). See Hammersley (2013: 41-43) for some help here. On the relevance of Popper for

2. An eventual '*knowledge claim*' based on evidence, and arising from experimentation and investigation (the enquiry normally using a combination of empirical observation and reason, depending on the kind of knowledge)
3. Provisional *validation* attempt of the knowledge claim (discussed in section 3 below)²²

The first stage was studied by Michael Polanyi in his dense and difficult *Personal Knowledge* (1957)²³. Hirst (1983:13-14) cites Polanyi and also observes that the important thing is to have a genuine problem, and that without this, work is '*only scholastic*'. Hirst is exploring the implications of the idea that a craft (such as teaching), is trying to bring about *results*, and that this is a quite different kind of enquiry from an investigation leading to 'pure' knowledge (if indeed such 'pure knowledge' exists). The knowledge Polanyi describes involves an '*active grasping*', where the knower makes his own knowledge (Polanyi 1957: pp. vii-viii), which arguably is more suited to a practical activity or form of knowing – such as riding a bicycle or swimming - than to formal, empirical, research.²⁴

Some implications of Polanyi's thinking for how teachers grow their knowledge have been discussed by Michael Eraut, for example, the idea that learning knowledge and using knowledge are part of the same process (1992, 1994).²⁵ However, it goes beyond the scope of this essay to present and discuss work from education which considers how teachers grow their knowledge of teaching and the classroom

education, see a discussion by Carr & Kemmis (pp. 118-122). (There are references to Popper in Brumfit's work, especially on validation criteria for knowledge claims)

²² Stages 1 and 2 may work in a loop, before the process moves onto stage 3. Stage 3 may also loop back (see Talisse 2008: 41-42) to stage 1, creating a method of investigation into a problem area which may even continue indefinitely (as seen in enquiry in philosophy, cosmology and theology). Other problems, which are solved more quickly, lose their status as sciences or fields of enquiry, and become routine technologies. Pedagogy, in that the basic principles are arguably understood in education (although these are not normally discussed in EFLT) is, on this understanding, a technology.

²³ See Polanyi (1957: section 5.11). Michael Polanyi FRS (1891-1976), was educated in Hungary, studied medicine, became first a Physical Chemist, then Economist, and then Social Sciences Professor at the University of Manchester in the 1950s. He argues (paraphrased) "*that positivism supplies a false account of knowing, which if taken seriously undermines our highest achievements as human beings*" (Source: Wikipedia). Polanyi is frequently cited in writings about the education of teachers. Also see Polanyi's deep essay *Knowing and Being* (in Grene ed 1969), where he asks for example (paraphrased): 'Can knowing and doing be exercised in isolation?' (p. 126). See Nye, MJ (2011), *Michael Polanyi and his World: origins of the social construction of science*, University of Chicago Press.

²⁴ 'Tacit knowledge' is discussed in Polanyi (1966: ch. 1). For education it is discussed by Guy Claxton in Ch. 2 of *Teaching to learn: a direction for education* (1990), Cassell. Also see work, which partly derives from Polanyi, done at the University of Bristol Graduate School of Education in Claxton (1996), and Atkinson & Claxton (2000).

²⁵ See Eraut (1994: 14-17 & 25-26). For more discussion on the learning of implicit knowledge, and for an appreciation of the complexities of conceptualising and investigating it, see Eraut, M (2000), *Non-formal learning, implicit learning and tacit knowledge in professional work*, in Coffield (ed) (2000), *The necessity of informal learning*, The Policy Press.

encounter, except that to suggest that EFLT has much to learn from education in this area.²⁶

2.2 So, three influential thinkers who have studied methods of enquiry and the growth of knowledge – Dewey, Polanyi and Popper – concur in concluding that the growth of knowledge takes place in an experimental way, starting from a problem-situation. For the teacher to ground this insight, it follows, in order to grow her own knowledge, that she firstly needs to identify and acknowledge problems she and her students have, and secondly, that she needs to experiment in her teaching (in the sense of trying out a hypothesis) to address the problems. Clearly stated and understood problems are therefore a starting point for a teacher to, experimentally, grow her knowledge. However, problems are not always seen clearly, or they are even denied. Can philosophy help here? (2.3 & section 4 below)

2.3 Seeing a problem. Knowledge as seeing.

The American philosopher Charles Taylor, following much 20th century European epistemology as well as American ‘pragmatism’, has challenged the ‘quest for certainty’, and argues for a relativist approach to knowledge claims, in the following sense: he argues that fields of enquiry need to now abandon belief in the possibility of certainty and finality (for example searching for an answer to the question: “*How does one learn a second language?*”), and that the project is rather *to understand* our problems more clearly in the sense of *to see them* more clearly (following both Wittgenstein and Heidegger)²⁷. (Taylor, C, 1995, chapter 1)²⁸ (Or see Talisse (2008), ch. 2 & especially pp. 26-30).

It is often assumed that a field of enquiry develops by accumulating more facts, in order perhaps to provide material for theory construction. However, a different and more *en-lightening* approach might be that a field develops by *seeing through* surface ‘facts’ and as a result sees more clearly what has been hidden (as in the word *discover*). An enquirer should, on this understanding of the growth of knowledge, probe to essentials, to unravel a problem-situation, as well as carrying out empirical investigations (quantitative and/or qualitative).

²⁶ For example, Professor Donald McIntyre believes that (pre-service) teachers learn by hypothesis-testing (1988). See Eraut (1985: 128-131) on ‘knowledge creation’ by teacher, and Eraut (1992:103-110) which make many interesting points on a teacher’s learning. Claxton can be read for his thinking on teachers’ knowledge, which he sets in the context of ‘cognitive education’ (1996:47-53). See also Berliner (1987) (in Calderhead 1987), who proposes four conditions for a teacher to learn, as well as Calderhead (1988) on what might prevent a teacher from learning. Many of these ideas derive from Polanyi, and so from the concept of ‘practical knowledge’ and of ‘implicit knowledge’, in other words, they draw from the same epistemological roots as do the philosophers of education Hirst and Wilfred Carr.

²⁷ Wittgenstein and Heidegger both offer an epistemology in terms of *seeing more clearly*. Wittgenstein suggests that “The purpose of philosophy is not to explain but to point”, and a recurring motif in Heidegger is *uncovering to reveal*. (paraphrased)

²⁸ For a more difficult historical survey of this problem, see Glaserfeld (1995: ch. 2). For a thorough critique of the assumption that an observer-subject dichotomy is possible, see Freeman H & Jones A (1980), *Educational Research and Two Traditions of Epistemology*, in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, **12**. (The objections to enquiry which presupposes that one can ‘know’ the world by gathering ‘data’ or ‘information’ about it has been made in Philosophy many times.)

Hirst writes: “*To acquire knowledge is to learn to see*” (Hirst 1974a: 40). Such *seeing*, following the tradition in philosophy which is critical of a strong (positivist) empirical tradition, must belong to the individual. So, for example, the lone teacher may not ‘know’ how languages are learned, but from her *in-sight* into her class, and her understanding of the problems and difficulties her students face, she may understand and see more clearly than a researcher what interventions – or non-interventions – are needed (Section 4.2 below). This personal insight is her knowledge claim for herself. She has ‘constructed’ her knowledge.²⁹

2.4 Another but complementary approach, following John Dewey, is that a teacher, is trying to solve ‘*some specific trouble*’ She is working within a *pragmatic*, or practical, tradition³⁰. Although her knowledge grows, I have proposed, according to the 3-stage framework given above (a problem-situation, leading to a knowledge claim, and this requiring some validation attempt), because she is operating within a different kind of knowledge than for example the pure sciences, she can use a different *way or process* to grow her knowledge – to move from problem to knowledge claim about the classroom encounter (and the resulting understanding is her own.) For example, validation criteria for ‘private knowledge’ can be less rigorous than for ‘public knowledge’ (Section 3.4 below)

In Section Four below I will explore some implications for TEFL of starting from problem-situations. However, because this review is set in the context of the more general and deeper question of how a teacher’s knowledge *grows*, we first need to look at the issue of validation, which is the third stage in the growth of knowledge proposed above. We return in Section 4 to the idea of starting from problems – extrapolating from the ideas introduced above to problems met in teaching.

SECTION THREE VALIDATION³¹

The study of the growth of knowledge cannot be separated from the validation stage, which gives feedback to knowledge claims. Validation (sometimes called ‘justification’) is, firstly, scrutiny *against experience* of a knowledge claim. Validation can secondly, and either separately from this empirical scrutiny or combined with it, include a rationalist component, including firstly identification and

²⁹ Dick Allwright, in his writings on ‘Exploratory Practice’, also emphasises the value of starting from *understanding* a problem (or ‘puzzle’), rather than reacting to a situation in terms of immediately asking what action is needed. See Allwright, D, *The Developing Language Language Learner*, pages 52-57 & 176-181.

³⁰For a clear presentation of this tradition of working, and of Dewey’s views on knowledge, and for their significance for education and for this essay, see David Carr (2003: 123-28). Also see Talisse chs. 1 & 2.

³¹ Karl Popper writes: “*I propose to replace the question of the sources of our knowledge by the entirely different question: How can we hope to detect and eliminate error?*” (1963c: 25), quoted by Ziman (1978: 109).

scrutiny of assumptions made at the stage of defining a research problem, as well as, secondly, probing for conceptual clarification of terms used in a research question.³²

Both empirical and rationalist validation requires to be carried out in a *specific context* (See Waters (2009b: 607). This would imply, for example, that a result obtained in a research study, or for a small group in a private language school, cannot be necessarily extrapolated to a secondary school context. An example of validation being carried out in a specific context and which combines empirical and rationalist strategies is the following: For the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP), at the third and concluding stage of writing laboratory reports, students are required, in order to earn a good mark, to self-critically discuss their results (i.e. their knowledge claims) including issues of accuracy, and tolerance of errors (i.e. the empirical stage), as well as their conceptualisation of the design of their experiment, and interpretation of data. (i.e. the rationalist stage).^{33 34}

3.1 Within EFLT, there seems to be little debate on the issue of, and need for, validation. When validation is discussed in ALLT and SLA, this is often only ‘weak form’ validation, and is done in the context of simply validating specific research projects.³⁵ Such weak form validation in ALLT and SLA does not discuss validation in the context of scrutinising underlying concepts, nor do the EFLT source disciplines scrutinise ideas which they propose to EFLT in a more general or more fundamental sense.³⁶ For example, how would one scrutinise or ‘validate’ “task-based learning”? (See a critical article by Swan, Chapter 8 in Swan 2012).

³² The first, empirical form of validation can be labelled the ‘weak form’, and the second and rationalist form of validation can be labelled the ‘strong form’. Michael Swan has employed both forms in his (2012), although not actually calling his programme of work validation, although it is, in that it scrutinises assumptions which lie under many knowledge claims about EFLT. I suggest that the strong form is more powerful and logically prior to weaker empirical validation because it probes concepts and underlying assumptions which empirical studies, and their validation models, rely on, and which they do not probe – concepts such as materials, teaching and learning.

³³ This scrutiny of knowledge claims is required in all IBDP Investigations, and is coordinated in the *Theory of Knowledge* course, which explores the need for, and mechanisms of, validation of knowledge claims. The principle followed is that observation must be combined with reflection: Empirical validation is never enough for the IB – concepts and arguments need to be scrutinised also. This can be complex work, but the students who are awarded the highest marks achieve it. The sophistication of reflection on, and discussion of, their investigation methods and knowledge claims offered by the best IBDP students in their Investigations is, I found, arguably often better than such reflection in much published research on second language acquisition.

³⁴ For Hirst, different forms of knowledge need to be validated against different (but overlapping?) sets of criteria. For the natural sciences, an extensive literature (for example Popper (1963c) exists on validation criteria. However, these criteria cannot be simply and necessarily extrapolated to education, which is a different form of knowledge.

³⁵ See for example Allwright D & Bailey K (1991: 48-50) *Focus on the classroom: an introduction to classroom research for language teachers*, CUP; or Nunan D. (1992) *Research Methods in Language Learning* (62-63 & 80-81), CUP; or Dornyei (2007: 52-61), *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*.

³⁶ The Nobel laureate and theoretical physicist Richard Feynman writes: “*You cannot prove a vague theory wrong*”, in other words, an imprecisely stated propositional knowledge claim is in principle incapable of being negatively validated. (The imprecision may arise from undefined concepts used in stating a knowledge claim, or in unstated assumptions). See ch.7, pp 162-177, of Feynman, RP, *The Character of*

We might want to for example scrutinise, or validate, the two claims that in a large secondary school class, ‘strategies’, firstly, need to be taught, and secondly, can be taught, as Swan scrutinises (see Swan 2008). There are numerous other examples requiring validation, for example, the need for and relevance of teaching ‘register’ in writing, and ‘humanist language teaching’³⁷. Some questions to ask as part of the validation process might be: ‘*Where is your evidence?*’; ‘*Is your evidence trustworthy?*’; ‘*If experiments were done, were variables identified?*’ (This is weak form or empirical validation); and (now follow strong form validation questions) ‘*What assumptions are made in your method of enquiry?*’ as well as ‘*What do you mean by (for example) the concept ‘task-based learning’?*’ *Are you referring to a strong or a weak form of the concept?*’, and so on.³⁸ Validation can be summarised in the one question “*Why should we believe you?*”

Chris Brumfit (in *Individual Freedom in Language Teaching*, page 184), following Popper, proposes a “loop” or built-in reassessment process, which continually modifies knowledge claims, which acts as validation. However, EFLT does not possess validation procedures or instruments for propositional knowledge claims from ALLT and other source disciplines, nor do the source disciplines normally design validation procedures for claims (whether implicit or explicit) concerning the relevance of their ideas for teaching. As a result, propositional knowledge claims are often left unchallenged, and can so can easily, by default, become part of EFLT myth, or ideology.³⁹ Or it may be naively and unjustifiably assumed that because an idea worked in a small cooperative group it will also work in a large secondary class.⁴⁰ Michael Swan has in his articles (Swan 2012) used instruments of validation (similar to the questions in the above paragraph), in order to scrutinise proposals from ALLT for EFLT. These instruments and questions include :

- *questioning the reliability of evidence;*
- *identifying assumptions which were unstated and under the surface;*
- *asking probing questions;* and
- *identifying the use of poor and fallacious reasoning (such as employing false dichotomies).* (For example, Swan 2005).

Physical Law (1965, 1992 2nd ed., Penguin), for an accessible presentation of methods of enquiry in Physics. The quote is from p. 158.

³⁷ See Brumfit, CJ (1983), *Some humanistic doubts about humanist language learning*, where validation is done by identifying contradictions in the ‘strong form’ of the concept of humanist language learning. (In *ELT Documents 113*, ed Early, P, pub. British Council). Brumfit was influenced by Hirst: (see Brumfit’s 1984: ch. 1). Both worked in London at the same time.

³⁸ The school subject *Theory of Knowledge (TOK)*, teaches students how to ask such questions, in order to be critical about knowledge claims in their other school subjects, and, more importantly, to be self-critical of knowledge claims in their own externally marked Investigations. Visit www.ibo.org.

³⁹ On ideology in Mathematics Education see an extensive but polemical description in Ernest (1991 pp. 122-23; 131-35; 145-67 & 176-185). On ‘science as ideology’ (and by extrapolation, how any knowledge claim can be ideological), see Carr & Kemmis (1986: 7).

⁴⁰ There is some interesting work on validation in *The Continuum Companion to Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, (2010), by Anne Burns (pp 85-87) and Susan Gass (P. 73

Four other interesting articles which examine myth or ideology in EFLT and ALLT are Castagnaro (2003) on the ‘making of a myth’, which he studies by going to the original source; Waters (2009a) on ‘ideology’ in ALLT; O’Neill (1991) on ‘learner-centredness’; and Sheen (2003: 232), who writes:

... “applied linguists need to be aware of any developing myth (and) teachers need to be aware of applied linguists bearing gifts supported by theoretical argument but bereft of empirical evidence...”

Sheen & O’Neill (2001) raise issues relating to validation, and validation in the classroom is also referred to by Professor Widdowson.⁴¹

Suggestions for the teaching of ‘pragmatics’ is another good example of a propositional knowledge claim introduced into EFLT by ALLT without validation.⁴² An important criticism of ‘teaching pragmatics’ is that students are, in fact, capable of ‘learning pragmatics’ for themselves. (See Swan 2007 on introducing ‘pragmatics’ into language teaching). The pedagogical principle of teaching *foundations* means that introducing pragmatics, certainly in a secondary school, can make learning more puzzling and complex for learners, distracting them from their core problems. (See Swan 2012 on the need for pedagogy in EFLT, pages 11, 17, 26, 90, 102-03, 112, 159, 165, 171-71, or see articles 4, 5, 6, 8, 14 & 15).⁴³

3.2 Turning now, for a moment, from validation in TEFL to validation in the broader context of education⁴⁴ (arguably the real home of TEFL), Gorard & Cook (2007) observe that some educational decisions have been taken into classrooms without evidence to back them up, and they write:

“some of these turned out to be quite disastrous, for example, new math” (ibid: 309).

Steven Gorard, Professor of Educational Research at the University of Birmingham, tries to understand why validation is sometimes neglected. He writes of:

“... our love of specific theories, and our consequent unwillingness to test them for failure (ibid: 317)”, and he asks for more ‘*outright scepticism*’.

Cook writes as a commissioner of large-scale research studies. Concerning knowledge claims to effective practice Gorard & Cook write:

“... many claims have failed to stand up to hard scrutiny, and have not led to clear cumulative learning about what works (due to an) absence of a theoretical and empirical warrant” (ibid: 313)

⁴¹ Professor Widdowson discusses some issues raised in this essay, including the relation between theory and practice in teaching, and validation, in Widdowson (2003). His *Aspects of Language Teaching* (1990: chs 3 & 4), CUP, also raises the issue of validation.

⁴² There is no link between pragmatics in linguistics and the school of philosophy called pragmatism. (Section 3.4 below)

⁴³ Paul Hirst, who had been a secondary school teacher, argues that teaching is about presenting core elements. He writes: *“We can reduce the complexities (for our students) by seeing that the conceptual relations we include are absolutely essential for our purpose. Every unnecessary element that might befog an explanation can be omitted ... We can use every opportunity to emphasise the central core of what is being done, rather than go in for extensions and explorations of the ideas and their more complex applications”* (Hirst 1974: 29) (See also Swan: 2012: 64 & 48-54)

⁴⁴ On validation in education see Elliot, J (1987: 151, 152 & 164-65).

Wilfred Carr writes on validation:

“We cannot occupy a position outside practice (and) practical justification is the only kind there is” (Carr 2006: pp 137 & 155).

Professor McIntyre understands the pressure on researchers:

«Educational researchers, subject as they have been to sustained simplistic propoganda urging them to ensure that their findings are demonstrably relevant to practice, have tended in recent years to be much too ready to short-circuit the proper validating processes...» (2005:364)

3.3 One possible reply from ALLT (or SLA) to the above arguments (in Section 1 and in this section on validation) might be as follows:

We can see that teachers are best placed to grow pedagogical knowledge, starting from their classroom problems, and we can respect that, acknowledging that ALLT (or SLA) cannot have the same understanding of pedagogy and the classroom encounter as teachers have. So, we will occupy ourselves with the content and order of introduction of *language* (or with second language acquisition strategies), and if publishers seek input from us, we will integrate our ideas into materials. Teachers, meanwhile, will develop *pedagogy*.

However, a problem with this proposal would be that the teacher needs to be involved in the development of the applied linguist's descriptions, and especially if ALLT and SLA studies have any input into materials (which is arguably both an issue of language and of pedagogy – see Section 1.3 above), in order to give feedback at an early stage of development as to whether these statements are compatible with good pedagogical principles. An example of the need for such scrutiny lies in ‘Communicative Language Teaching’ (CLT), which in my experience is avoided by many secondary teachers in Poland and elsewhere because of the classroom reality of discipline. The issue of classroom control is central to secondary school language teaching, as it is problems of discipline and classroom management which prevent teachers from applying CLT (as in for example doing pairwork). However, a middle way or ‘mediated’ form of CLT, more integrated with earlier pre-1980 EFLT thinking on teaching speaking, and taking into account classroom realities may arise out of the attempt at validation, but I suggest that this needs to be negotiated with those who teach, and design syllabi, and write materials. Questions might include: *“Perhaps more controlled practice is required? More input? Specific learning targets?”* etc ⁴⁵

By having a dialogue with teachers, and by being in a large secondary classroom, CLT advocates would understand better the teacher's problems and issues in implementing his ideas, and the applied linguist could *see* the teacher's problem from another point of view, learning about the problems the teacher must solve. An implication of the Applied Linguist subjecting his ideas to validation might be also that, as a result, his theory, mediated by pedagogical realities, can be adapted and thus

⁴⁵ Relevant to validation, see Carr W. (2007:282). Also see Waters (2009a: 142 & (2009b: 607). Also see McIntyre D. (2005: 377-79)

strengthened because it takes account of secondary school classroom realities.⁴⁶ Such dialogue between ALLT and teacher does not generally seem to happen at the moment.

3.4 We have discussed validation of ‘theory’ proposed by source disciplines, but if the teacher is making her own claims (for herself) in the form of practical knowledge, there must similarly be the condition of some validation procedure. For Hirst, different forms of knowledge will require differing criteria for validation, and I suggest that justification (i.e., validation) for the work done by the teacher can be done at the classroom level, according to the criterion of *pedagogical problems and students’ problems being solved*. I propose that if some particular teaching strategy, approach or intervention (or deliberate non-intervention) consistently results in something *working*, then the action must have been appropriate, and is so *justified*, and validated. If for example, from experience, as a teacher, I consistently find that controlled practice before a role-play gives better results, then my strategy is justified. There is one proviso: the teacher is claiming that it worked for her, and in that context, and so she does not have the right to extend her claims and validation beyond that. She is working in a pragmatic tradition concerning *what works*, and not what might be true, in a more universal sense.⁴⁷ Her validation is ‘private’, not public.

3.5 Why does the ‘source disciplines issue’ (i.e., the questioning of the role of propositional knowledge claims for EFLT), as treated in Section One above, require to be linked with a discussion of how knowledge grows and is validated? Because source disciplines, if they claim relevance to EFLT, are incomplete in that, concerning their practical applications, they neglect the third (validation) stage of the growth of knowledge: source disciplines make claims to knowledge especially concerning materials (and so by implication about teaching - 1.3 above), but they neglect the validation stage in the classrooms where most EFL teaching is done – secondary classrooms. So, the true weakness of source disciplines informing and influencing practice cannot be appreciated until it has been argued that a validation stage is needed for the growth of knowledge. It could also be argued that the source disciplines of ALLT, SLA and Social Psychology similarly neglect the first stage of the growth of knowledge – starting from a relevant problem: the problems they start with are their own, not the teachers’, or students’.

⁴⁶ Also see a discussion by Price, a Historian of Technology, who argues that science needs technology (the analogy being that ALLT needs EFLT). He writes: “*whenever science or technology (do not feed from each other) the results have been disastrous for both. Science without the byplay of technology becomes sterile*” (Price DJ, *Science and Technology: Distinctions and Interrelationships*, in Barnes SB [1972, ed], *Sociology of Science readings*, Penguin, page 174).

⁴⁷ John Dewey writes:

“*If (an idea is) instrumental to a removal of some specific trouble and perplexity, then the test of (its) validity ... lies in accomplishing this work*”

Quoted by C.D. Hardie (1942) in *Truth and Fallacy in Education*, p. 48, original source J.Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, pp 156-57). Also see McIntyre D (2005:367-68 & 378). Or see Talisse (2008: 61; 65-69 & 72-73). For help on what ‘pragmatism’ is, see Talisse (pp. 1-3 & 7). Pragmatism can be usefully understood as a ‘*philosophical methodology*’ (Talisse), which can be applied for example to Education, to enquiry about the teaching of individual school subjects, or to any form of practice.

SECTION FOUR PEDAGOGY, AND IMPLICATIONS OF STARTING FROM PROBLEMS

4.1 If it is conceded that theory, or propositional knowledge, *as a starting point* for a teacher to grow her knowledge has many question marks over it (Section 1 and 3 above), should practice then be a starting point? Before exploring this idea further, and to be clearer by what is meant by ‘practice’, let’s now go into a secondary classroom, and look at what is actually going on. If it is the case that knowledge often starts from a problem-situation (section 2 above), then a secondary school classroom, with the problems there, would seem to be fertile ground for starting to grow knowledge.

The problems observed will include some students who fail to understand the work, some students who are under-achieving and are bored and so are restless, students who are rejecting what is being proposed, students who have given up, students with problems of hearing or sight, or unwell (and these problems perhaps undiagnosed), students who have missed the previous lesson and are lost, conflicts over homework, forgotten books, etc. In addition, there are the learning problems. In a small group, perhaps in a private language school, it is possible to cover up or deal with such problems, but in a larger state-school class, the teacher can easily be overwhelmed, and if she does not deal with the problems, very little learning will be achieved.⁴⁸ But we need a clearer definition of ‘an educational problem’. Wilfred Carr offers a definition:

“Educational problems ... occur when the practices employed in educational activities are in some way inadequate to their purpose”.
(1983:37) (my emphasis)

A problem, in this educational sense, relates to non-achievement, or failure.⁴⁹ If knowledge, and the enquiry leading to knowledge, begins from a problem (for example, students who are failing to produce oral work), a first step is to *see* and *understand* the problem.

I taught pedagogy (‘Methodology’ and ‘Classroom Management’) for three years in pre-service language teacher training colleges in Poland (NKJOs). I asked my trainee teachers (for their main dissertation) to start from a problem-situation / hypothesis, and this seemed to encourage them to see teaching as an experimental process of continuing, informal, enquiry. (Again, see Talisse [2008: 120] on Dewey’s understanding of the growth of knowledge as *a process of experimentation*.)

4.2 Developing the idea of starting from problems, Polanyi warns however:
“ all (investigations) must start from a problem .. but how can we see a problem ... for to see a problem is to see something that is hidden”(1966:21) (my emphasis)

⁴⁸ See McIntyre D (2005:360) for a description of the secondary classroom. Also see McIntyre (2005:358) for an argument, also made in this essay, that for a teacher, practical knowledge is pedagogy.

⁴⁹ See Carr, W (1983) on the need for research to start from problems. See also Carr, W, (1986), *Theories of Theory and Practice*, describing four possible ways for a teacher to relate to theory. Also, see Carr (1980), *The Gap Between Theory and Practice*. These two last are papers reprinted as chapters 1 & 2 of (Carr, W, 1995). Also see Boudi D. & Felletti G (1991:14-17) for a history of problem-based learning.

I think that what Polanyi means by this is that a problem, as we normally and superficially observe it, is often *not* the problem but only a symptom of an underlying problem. For example, oil leaking from a pipe in an oil field is not the underlying problem, which lies in a failure elsewhere. Similarly, with a student who has failed to master material, the problem for the teacher is not to focus on the student's faulty output, or lack of it, but rather the problem lies in what *led to* the failure.

Now, the most serious educational problem in modern language teaching at secondary school level is arguably the core issue of student failure – of failing to learn to speak, or write English.⁵⁰ Some probing by the teacher (perhaps by asking the right questions) is first needed, not action, and so faced with student failure to understand and produce work, the preliminary issue is not what the teacher should *do* next, rather the teacher's task is rather to focus on seeing the problem in order to understand the failure. This idea is also found in Dick Allwright's 'Exploratory Practice'.

This injunction to *see* the problem is perhaps why, for Hirst, and quoted earlier, '*to acquire knowledge is to learn to see*', and Hirst continues "*to experience the world in a way otherwise unknown*" (1974:40). For example, in the context of oral interaction, the teacher will need to look in the right place (See Polanyi 1957 at the beginning of section 5.11, page 120). Maybe she should not, for example, be looking at the student, or materials, or test results, but at the relationship which students have with materials⁵¹. To address a problem, the teacher will first perhaps need to see and understand her *students'* problems in the sense of where her students are in their subjective experience, as for example Richard Skemp looks at mathematical learning in the context of student-material relationship at the secondary level (Skemp 1976).⁵²

⁵⁰ Philosophy, always interested in conceptual clarification, would introduce two questions here: **What is learning?** and **What is (the English) language?** These are logically prior questions to the question of "*Why does a student fail to learn to speak the English language?*", as the concepts of '*learning*' and '*the English language*' are embedded in the last question. (Hirst 1974c argues that learning a school subject is to learn concepts.) Language, at the level which students seem to have most difficulties, is arguably *a set of concepts*, with different languages having different (although overlapping) sets of concepts. If different languages have differing sets of concepts, then a student, when learning a second language, is learning new concepts, and also learning where the concepts in his own language do not apply in the target language; It follows that the study of the bringing to use of grammatical forms, vocabulary and so on is only a superficial treatment of what actually happens in the EFL classroom. The above, however, generates more questions, but these are questions which may help unravel the problem of how a language is learned, for example, "*What difficulties might students need to overcome in order to master the concepts?*", and "*Can the learning of a concept be divided into more manageable stages?*", and "*What might impede the student from learning new concepts?*", etc, which can help us to understand the problems teacher and students need to solve. (See the two footnotes immediately following)

⁵¹ Social psychology studies teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction. However, I do not know of a study of *student-material engagement*, not with the aim of understanding *learning*, but rather of understanding *failure to learn*. A study which prepares the ground for this is perhaps Spolsky (1989) *Conditions for Language Learning*, OUP. Work was done on this at the University of Warwick Mathematics Educational Research Centre by Richard Skemp and followers, in the context of failure to learn Mathematics. If learning a language is, as for maths, partly about learning and applying concepts, then there may be lessons for EFL to learn from this work in Mathematics Education. See, for example Gray (2002), or Skemp (1971).

⁵² Developing the footnote before last, it follows that we can better understand the student's problems by understanding where he is, or where he is confused or lost, in his "concept formation route", as he moves from his L1 concepts to L2 concepts. For example, Hirst argues, if an understanding of a concept presupposes the understanding of a second concept, then the second concept must be mastered first. (Hirst

An implication of the above discussion is that the problem needs to be ‘uncovered’, or ‘unpacked’, in order to see the cause of the problem. Some probing questions as used in pedagogy might start to unlock the problem: “*Were learning objectives clear: what exactly did I want my students to learn, or to understand? At what point in the learning process does the failure occur? Are materials responsible? Too much material present? Confusing materials?*”, etc, and then, through her pedagogy, address the failure.

4.3 Discussion. From my own teaching experience, the classroom teacher’s root problem is *not* “*How do students learn?*”, but rather “*Why do they fail to learn?*”. For example, present simple and present continuous tenses are mixed by a student who consistently uses the form “*I am do.*”. Why? “*Has some earlier failure occurred when students misconceived earlier material?*” or “*Was material introduced too quickly?*” or “*Was sufficient practice time given at an earlier stage?*” etc. Most of the questions in this paragraph and the above one relate to the link between materials and pedagogy. The questions suggested here, belonging to education and pedagogy, are trying to throw light on a failure, and they are also searching for clues to different practice which would lead to better results. Practice in teaching is pedagogy. and so it is her pedagogy that the teacher needs to refer to, or needs help with, in order to tackle these questions. So it follows that practical knowledge in the form of *pedagogy* is the form of knowledge that a secondary teacher needs to master, and propositional knowledge (i.e. ‘*theory*’) must take second place. If a student’s problem derives from the teacher’s failure to understand pedagogical needs, the solution will be pedagogical. Since materials bear a lot of the pedagogical load in large-class teaching, the above discussion also perhaps has implications for materials – perhaps:

- more on-task time at the correct level;
- following the pedagogical principle of introducing one difficulty at a time;
- helping the students construct foundations (Swan: 2012); and
- better differentiation of level in materials, etc.

Pedagogy can make many other suggestions here. ⁵³

Professionals in other client-centred fields (e.g., medicine, or therapy) begin their intervention and grow their knowledge of a client by taking a history in the context of problems: they may *refer* to theory and research, but they *start from* problems and

will probably have understood this from his experience of teaching mathematics.) Also see Skemp (1971, 1986 2nd ed., pp. 30-33), or see Ernest (1999:102-05), or see ch.10 of Glaserfeld (1995). For examples of conceptual confusion in learning mathematics, see Kent (1979). For Hirst, different students will have different routes, although the end point will be the same, as in the completion of a jigsaw puzzle. Since more work has been done in mathematics Education than in TEFL or ALLT on this, perhaps TEFL can learn from mathematics teaching here, as both subjects require the assimilation and application of concepts. If language learning is concept learning, then there are implications for teaching and learning. Glaserfeld writes: *concepts and conceptual relations are mental structures that cannot be passed from one mind to another. Concepts have to be built up individually by each learner*”. (1995:186). The question arises “*How?*”, and Skemp answers, “*Through numerous examples.*”

⁵³ John Elliot writes “*pedagogical principles derive from practice, and are intended to anticipate and prevent problems*”(1987:151-52) This observation clearly makes the point that pedagogy is not a body of theory, but a body of principles which have been derived from practice. Pedagogy is therefore validated when the principles it uses work in practice,

failure. A doctor is interested in a patient's pathology, not in his health. However, ALLT does not have a tradition of starting from problems when intervening in EFLT (although a tradition exists in English for Specific Purposes teaching) - perhaps because not understanding the classroom and pedagogy, it does not know what the teachers' problems are. For a *practical activity*, following Polanyi, Hirst and Wilfred Carr, it is problems embedded in practice, in the sense of inadequacies, which are a starting point for growth of knowledge. There are limits, I conclude, to what propositional knowledge can offer practice, and although proposers of propositional knowledge may not be aware what the limits are, the practitioner needs to be aware.

A further general danger of 'theory' is that it stops further thought and so acts as an impediment to progress, and this can be seen in the history of science. John Ziman writes of scientists who are '*inhibited from imaginative steps by their attachment to existing theory*'⁵⁴ Thus, an implication of giving theory and source disciplines a lesser role is that, in not having theory to rely on, teachers are obliged to start from their problem-situation, just as other professionals do – by asking themselves questions, and maybe as a result seeing the situation afresh.

4.4 Conclusions

The conclusions which my argument has led to are that:

1. Problems in teaching, especially student failure, make a good starting point for growing a teacher's knowledge and understanding of the classroom encounter (sections 2.3 and 4.2 above)
2. However, teachers should not reject 'theory' (propositional knowledge claims), but for the isolated secondary teacher who cannot update herself with new theory, the classroom is for her the only starting point for growing her knowledge (3.4 above).
3. Source disciplines, to be relevant, need to be validated or mediated for EFLT teaching. In the past, their often unmediated and unvalidated influence has arguably been too strong (3.1 above).
4. In EFLT, more attention needs to be given to pedagogy as a guide to practice (footnote 16 above and section 4 above)

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

5.1 This essay has been written from the perspective of a secondary school teacher. I came into TEFL after teaching mathematics for two years in a Lancashire comprehensive school. When I entered the TEFL world of an RSA course (excellent), and south-coast language schools, I was struck by the lack of attention given in the world of TEFL to the practice of teaching, and I saw that education was not taken account of in debates in TEFL. I saw that the then-dominant ideas in TEFL (which were 'humanist language learning', learner-centred approaches, notional-functional syllabuses, and communicative language teaching) had not been 'stress-tested' against secondary school classroom realities. I wanted to understand, and would still like to understand:

- firstly "*Why does the situation exist where EFLT has drawn so little from education?*" and secondly

⁵⁴ Ziman, J, (1968:80). John Ziman FRS, was Professor of Theoretical Physics at the University of Bristol

- “What can be done about remedying the situation?”⁵⁵

Ron White (1989: 83-84), following Howatt (1984)⁵⁶, has identified some reasons for the neglect by TEFL of education. He suggests that:

- Historically, “*EFL has evolved from a tradition which has been largely separate from mainstream education*”
- “*the predominant influences on the development of ELT as a profession have come from applied linguistics*”
- “*(for many years) ELT (and modern language teaching) ,... remained isolated from education influences in the metropolitan areas*”
- the universities did not take methodology seriously until the PGCE, and so “*generations of ELT and modern language teachers passed into the profession without any really serious pedagogical training*”
- The founding fathers of EFLT were phoneticians or language specialists.

This list of causes for the neglect of education could be extended: for example, many ideas were developed for small group teaching, with well-motivated students, where pedagogy can be neglected. One result of EFLT not going to education to learn about teaching is that it has not researched work in for example mathematics teaching, where many of the problems faced by both teacher and learner are similar to those in TEFL, and arguably require similar solutions. (See the final footnote in section 4.2 above)

5.2 If EFLT, neglecting education, has often unreflectively and so incautiously drawn from ALLT, and if ALLT has encouraged this we can say that EFLT has sometimes been colonised by ALLT⁵⁷. However, ALLT cannot be blamed for being **intrusive** and **intra-disciplinary**: this is how the academic world works, as scholars and researchers look for funding and applications for their work.⁵⁸ But fields sometimes need to defend themselves from other fields and influences, and EFLT does not have this defence. TEFL should not expect ALLT to do this work for it.

⁵⁵ HH Stern writes: “*Because of lack of thought, and probably some academic snobbery, education may not have received the same consideration in language teaching theory as has been given to the other disciplines. There is hardly anything in the way of a ‘history’ of the relationship between the study of education and language pedagogy to report. Yet the study of education has the totality of the practice of education as its object*” (Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching, 1983: 419, OUP)

⁵⁶ Howatt, APR & Widdowson HG (1984, 2004), A History of English Language Teaching (CUP)

⁵⁷ Some conditions for a field to become self-contained in its own right are discussed by Isaiah Berlin (1978: 145-146). For Berlin, a field cannot claim to be autonomous **until it has examined its concepts and assumptions**. For an accessible exposition of the role that assumptions play at the ground level of knowledge claims, see Isaiah Berlin, The Sense of Reality, pp 14-24 & 59-76, ed H. Hardy, Pimlico, 1997.

⁵⁸ In a discussion of this issue in Hartnett & Naish (eds), Theory and Practice of Education, Heinmann 1976 (VOL II: 158-167), there is the following comment: (footnote 97) “*The educational system can be held to constitute ‘a receptive system’ ... for the work of certain theoretical disciplines, but it is a reception system which is extraneous to the disciplines in question, and consists to a very large extent of individuals who may have neither the time nor the competence to assess the relevance of, and especially the epistemological status, of the theoretical work*”

5.3 Proposals for follow-up work. In this essay I have not discussed how philosophy of education can contribute to TEFL by asking probing questions and by challenging assumptions, querying concepts and so opening up a school subject such as TEFL for further work. (See Barrow 2006 or Pring 2004 or David Carr 2003).

In the EFLT literature, however, there are some examples of such work being done on specific issues, cited above (3.1) – work by Waters, O’Neill, Sheen, Castagnero and especially by Swan. The work that is perhaps needed now is more of this kind of probing, as well as drawing on Education, which has many relevant insights to offer on how teachers grow their knowledge, and which only require grounding for EFLT.

The third issue of *Radical TEFL* will have the theme “*Thinking about teaching speaking*” and the fourth issue will take as a theme “*Researching and investigating student failure to learn in the EFL secondary classroom*”. Some examples of specific studies which might draw from education and from the methods of philosophy of education, and which could perhaps offer insights for understanding the teaching of speaking are suggested on the last pages of this issue.

Other questions for investigation in future issues of *Radical TEFL* might be:

- **Probing of specific problems and failures which occur in learning EFL, in order to understand their root causes** (This is the theme for Issue 4, and see p.32 of this issue);
- Attention given to areas which cannot be studied solely by observational methods, and which require a complementary rationalist analysis. For example, although *empirical evidence of* student failure can be studied, *underlying causes* cannot be studied empirically (Issue 4);
- A study which examines how ‘learner autonomy’ may be understood as more than ‘choice’, and how the concept can be widened, including giving the learner more independence in the way he *relates to materials*
- Studies of Mathematics learning and teaching at the secondary school level: What can be learned from Mathematics Education concerning pedagogy, and concerning the teaching and learning of concepts?
- A revisiting of work in Contrastive Analysis, to explore implications for understanding the learner’s difficulties (See Swan 2012: article 13)

In any study, work would need to be grounded to particular skills or aspects of the EFL classroom encounter.

It is because I believe that studies such as these could be helpful, in order for EFLT to deliberately position itself in a more educational context, and critically differentiate itself from the source disciplines, in whose interest it is to promote an emphasis on propositional knowledge rather than practical knowledge that I have started *Radical TEFL* as a forum to probe concepts, assumptions and ideology in TEFL.

Electronic version March 2015

(For this electronic version, the print edition has been slightly amended: some small corrections have been made; footnote 16 has been rewritten; and section 4.4 has been altered from the original. Page 32 has been added)

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About the author

Alistair Maclean studied Physics, Chemistry and The History and Philosophy of Science, and graduated in Philosophy. He has taught Mathematics in secondary schools in England and secondary EFL in Poland, and has also worked with pre-service and in-service EFL teachers. He was a research student with Christopher Brumfit in the 1980s, and tried unsuccessfully to link Philosophy with EFLT. He lived and taught in Poland for 20 years, and edited *The Polish Teacher Trainer* (1993-95, 10 issues published). He taught *Theory of Knowledge (TOK)* for the International Baccalaureate (Bilingual) Diploma, in Poland (2009-2011). *Radical TEFL* is his retirement project. Correspondence: Crossways, Sussex Ave., ROSS-ON-WYE, HR9 5AJ

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SOURCES

My main sources leading to the argument offered in this essay are my experiences of teaching in secondary schools; of teaching adults who failed to learn EFL in school; of teaching pre-service EFL trainees (in Poland); and of working in in-service education (mainly in Belgium). Below are the other sources which have helped me the most. (Where a reference is incomplete, please see the Bibliography. I have also acknowledged sources in the text, and in footnotes.) My most important influence was Chris Brumfit, whose early writings helped me to see that methods from Philosophy can be applied to Education, and to EFLT.

SECTION ONE. Knowledge and the teacher.

Section 1.1 Paul Hirst and Wilfred Carr. See Carr, W (1989:29); Carr, W. (1995, chs. 1 & 2). Also see Barrow, R: (1975, 2006: chapter. 14, 185ff). See especially Carr W. & Kemmis S. (1986: 53-77).

Section 1.2 Again, Paul Hirst and Wilfred Carr. **Section 1.3.** Brumfit CJ (1978), Review of Notional Syllabuses by David Wilkins, in *ELT Journal*, **33/1**. Paul Hirst. **Section 1.4** Paul Hirst, Wilfred Carr, Robin Barrow (2006), David Carr (2003) and Richard Pring (2004).

SECTION TWO. The Growth of Knowledge.

Section 2.1. Polanyi (1957): Especially, the Preface; ch 4 parts 9 & 10; ch 5: part 12; ch. 6: parts 5,6 & 8.. Also ch 1 parts 2 & 4; ch 2 parts 1 & 2; Ch 4 Parts 1,3,4,& 8; Ch 5 part 11; ch 6 parts 2,3 & 9; ch 8 part 12; ch 9 part 11; ch 10 parts 5 & 6. Popper (1963a) and Popper (1963b). Teaching the *Theory of Knowledge* course. Talisse. **Section 2.2** Teaching the *Theory of Knowledge* course, and teaching pre-service teachers. **Section 2.3** This section is based on 20th century Continental Philosophy which critically examines methods of enquiry, especially empirical enquiry. **Section 2.4** American pragmatic philosophy.

SECTION THREE. Validation

Section 3.1. Popper. Michael Swan's work: his probing, questioning and challenging of claims from source disciplines, and assumptions embedded in them about EFL teaching. (See Swan 2012: 59, 72, 103, 106, 122, 132-33, articles 7 & 13). Teaching the *Theory of Knowledge* course. **Section 3.2** Wilfred Carr. **Sections 3.3 & 3.4.** American pragmatist philosophy, especially William James and John Dewey.

SECTION FOUR. Pedagogy and starting from problem-situations

Section 4.1 My secondary school teaching experience. Again, Wilfred Carr (1983). **Section 4.2 & 4.3.** Polanyi. My experience of teaching secondary Mathematics.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Section 5.1 My PGCE course. Paul Hirst. **Section 5.2** Wilfred Carr.(Introduction to his 1995)

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THINKING ABOUT TEACHING SPEAKING

“We don’t seem much nearer to answering the central question
*‘What happens in people’s minds when they learn languages, and
how can we make it happen more effectively?’* ”(Michael Swan) ⁵⁹

The next issue of Radical TEFL would like to publish articles which are centred on attempts to understand the teaching of speaking, by for example trying to get under the surface of concepts used, and assumptions sometimes made. Articles should be also grounded to classroom experience either through examples from practice, or by referring to a more systematic study. (Please see the inside back cover for Guidelines for Contributors) Some entry points for discussion might include the following questions.

Learning and teaching speaking

What assumptions about speaking, and about the teaching of speaking are often unknowingly made? What is going on in students’ minds as they learn to speak English? Do we really know where students are in their learning? Do we need to know? Can the problem of language-learning be regarded as a problem of concept-learning? Why exactly do students conflate similar tenses? Why does a student become a ‘false beginner’ and how can it be avoided? How can we really understand students’ learning without knowing their first language?

Materials

In teaching speaking, what exactly do we want materials to do? Prompt language? Provide input? Allow student to confirm understanding? For example, in a large class, are materials and the ways in which students relate to them (or fail to relate) more significant than the students’ relationship to the teacher? When learning to speak, what are, for the student, materials? Do materials include students’ understanding or misunderstandings and misconceptions from previous English learning? From what source does the student learn more, and in what way – from the teacher, or from materials? Can we really separate the two? What pedagogical tasks can materials perform?

Speaking as communication?

Is language really ‘communication’, or is this to confuse the function of language with what language actually is? Aren’t languages sets of (overlapping) concepts – with implications for moving from one language to another? How do students construct their concepts in English, as they move from their first-language concepts to second-language concepts? Can meaning be communicated with grammar and form alone?

⁵⁹ Michael Swan (2012), *Thinking about language teaching: Collected papers*, page 59, OUP

Pedagogy

What are some pedagogical principles for teaching speaking? How important is on-task practice? How can it be maximised in a secondary class? How can communicative activities be adapted for speaking practice in secondary classes? What are the additional problems which need to be taken account of and solved? How can differentiation (of level) be introduced into material? Does tolerance of error result in error being reinforced and learned? What exactly is the function of the teacher, and what can the students alone only solve? What aspects of pedagogy must the teacher be responsible for, and where can materials also be pedagogical?

What can go wrong?

What can go wrong in teaching and learning speaking, resulting in failure? What are the implications of conflating the concepts of syllabus and pedagogy in TEFL; for example, because language is said to be communication, must pedagogy be communicative?

History

How did students in the past (before the communicative approach) learn to speak EFL, and learn to communicate meaning? Is there a lost tradition of pedagogical principles in the teaching of speaking, which we could learn from? What happened to the pedagogical principle of introducing communicative work only after controlled, mechanical practice?

Learning from elsewhere

Where can we go to approach the question of teaching and learning speaking from fresh angles? What other school subjects are similar to modern language teaching in the kind of difficulties students face and need to overcome? Can we learn from, for example Mathematics, to help students to move from mechanical practice to creative problem solving? What are the similarities and differences between teaching speaking and writing? Does practice in writing establish a foundation or preparation for speaking?

Methods of investigating the teaching and learning of speaking

How can we observe and report on the process of learning speaking, which is hidden from us, and internal to the student? Which of the questions asked here can be addressed by empirical studies, and which of them can be addressed by conceptual enquiry, examining assumptions and the meanings of concepts as they are employed?

(See facing page for Guidelines for Contributors)

Guidelines for Contributors

Please send your draft article (hard copy) to the address given on the inside from cover, for the dates given. Articles are especially welcome which draw from and cite literature from outside Applied Linguistics and SLA studies, for example, from Education, or the Philosophy of Education, or on the teaching of other school subjects.

Articles should please:

1. Start from a clear research question;
2. Try to get under the surface of the question addressed;
3. Be grounded to the EFL classroom, either by use of examples, or by being based on a study

Articles should please normally be related to the theme of the issue. If based on an empirical study, the method of enquiry adopted should be critically discussed. So far as possible, when citing other work, please specify chapters or page numbers, so that other researchers can easily find your sources, and also (in a footnote or in the text), briefly link the reference cited to your own argument. Copyright of articles will belong to authors.

The Welsh National Library at Aberystwyth

This issue was mainly researched at the Welsh National Library in Aberystwyth, which is open to anyone who has a UK address and ID, and is one of the six UK copyright libraries. This excellent library is ideal for research, containing all British books published since 1907, as well as books from the important USA publishers. Most UK Journals are available, but not always USA journals. Books and journals are available 45 minutes after ordering, making it easy to follow up references in an inter-disciplinary way. For the impecunious independent researcher this helpful and friendly library is ideal, as inexpensive dormitory accommodation can be booked at the Youth Hostel in the nearby seaside resort of Borth (£15/night with a YHA card, phone John the hostel warden on 01970.871.498, early evenings. The hostel has a self-catering kitchen, and there is a train to Aberystwyth (12 minutes ride, £2.50 return with a rail card). The library is 10 minutes walk from Aberystwyth railway station, up the hill and immediately before the University campus. The library is quiet outside term time, and has photocopying facilities.

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SHORT 'ARTICLE-REPORTS' ON

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 2. Give information about your students' previous learning and understanding of the topic;
 3. State what you did;
 4. Describe what happened (or didn't happen), and;
 5. Reflect on what you learned from the mismatch between intention and result;
 6. What would you change next time?
- **In all cases, be as specific as possible in your report, maybe focusing on just one student. Give information about materials.**
- **Send your article in Word format (single spaced, 12pt, 2 sides of A4 paper) to:**

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- **Send by 30 September 2015 (for March 2016 publication) Reports on failures and problems in teaching and learning speaking)**
- **Send by 30 September 2016 (for March 2017 publication) Reports on failures and problems for any kind of teaching and learning**

This could be a way for a young teacher, perhaps interested in academic work, to start publishing. 500 copies of Radical TEFL are printed.