Opening Statement: Changing Perspectives in EFL

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Thirty years ago, when I began teaching English as a Foreign Language in Brazil (after having taught English composition to first-year students at Kansas University), the EFL profession was undergoing the second of its major shifts of the last half century. During the seventies, in a still small but growing number of applied linguistics and ESL graduate programs, and in the recently-formed (1967) TESOL organization, with its annual conferences and *Quarterly*, researchers began to question the dogmas of the then-dominant audio-lingual approach, of some 25 years earlier, that had been inspired by US structural linguistics and behavioral psychology, championed by the Defense Language Institute, and popularized by a rapidly developing world market for instructional materials. At that time, anyone looking at the teaching of English as a Foreign Language and the teaching of English composition to college students at US universities would not have seen much common ground. I know I didn't.

In the ensuing decade and a half, the search was on for better *method*. Paradigmatic for this period is the short, seminal article by Clifford Prator, "The cornerstones of method", written in 1965 and reprinted in 1979.[1] Prator attempts to find order in a seemingly chaotic diversity of competing methods by positing three foundational questions on which all methods of language teaching should be based: 1) What is known about the nature of the language; 2) What is known about the nature of the learner; and 3) The aims of instruction. The assumption was that *method*, or the "behavior of the teacher", should vary according to the values assigned to the other three basic elements of the teaching situation: the subject matter, the learner, and the purpose.

At this time, there was not much discussion in EFL about the *aims*. The assumption was that the aims were basically instrumental, that learners *needed* English in order to compete in an already globalizing economy. If there was any focus at all on aims, they were always the aims *of the learner*, never the aims of the EFL industry or the aims of international post-colonial economic policy. Most of the activity was concentrated around the first two cornerstones: the nature of language and the nature of language acquisition and learning.

In a first phase, the concept of the nature of language was being influenced by the shift in linguistics from a structural to a generative paradigm and its focus on universals in grammar and language acquisition. Errors were re-analyzed as being manifestations of a process of grammar development. The concept of the nature of the learner was being influenced by the shift in psychology from a behavioral to a cognitive paradigm. The learner began to be understood as an active participant who brought prior knowledge to the learning process rather than a blank slate on which new behaviors could be inscribed. In a second phase, ideas about language also began to be revised in a quite different direction. Studies in variational and interactional sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking, in the United States, and, in Europe, descriptive studies of language use by language learners began to shed light on the highly adaptable nature of language to its immediate context and on the meaningful nature of language variety. The learner also began to be seen as a whole person, whose relations to those around

him and emotional response to the environment could influence the learning outcome. Out of these shifts in the values attributed to the "cornerstones" of language and learner emerged a loosely articulated set of principles which became known as "communicative" (or "humanistic") approaches to EFL. Most EFL teacher training continues to this day to be modeled around these principles, as do instructional materials.

What little attention was being given to *aims* was being directed toward whether the goal of instruction should continue to be *spoken* language (the assumption of the audio-lingual period) or whether it should be more closely oriented toward the uses that the learner would make of the foreign language, which, in the EFL context, is to a great extent reading, to some extent writing, and, if spoken, limited within a restricted vocabulary. Efficiency in teaching was sought through the design of curricula aimed at "specific purposes". The sought-after efficiency was, however, offset by the front-end costs of language-use analysis and materials preparation for very limited markets; and the exaggerated emphasis on the instrumental use of language as a learnable *skill* conflicted with what was being learned about language as a highly abstract and generalized set of communicative strategies designed to be infinitely and finely adaptable, and about the role of language in the formation and maintenance of groups and identities.

With the changes brought about by the "communicative" shift in EFL, many of the concerns of the profession begin to overlap with those of composition or rhetoric programs in US universities: the emphasis on context and variation, the emphasis on process, the emphasis on the learner. What is striking, though, looking back at this period from the vantage point of 2001 is how thoroughly the *teaching* and the entire context of instruction is conceived of as isolated on the one hand from larger social meanings and on the other from the meanings generated in the microdynamics of classroom interaction (which of course may be and probably are two sides of the same coin).

Since the mid eighties, and increasingly in the nineties, a third major shift in EFL has been taking place. During this period, EFL and composition studies have both drawn on many of the same sources for inspiration, particularly those generically referred to as "post-colonial", "post-structural", or "post-modern". Specifically in EFL studies, the assumptions underlying Prator's 1965 conception of the relation between "teacher-and-method" on the one hand and "language/learner/aims" on the other have been completely revised. "Teacher" can no longer be separated off as a disinterested party who, if provided with an adequate analysis of language, the learner and the aims of instruction, can apply an appropriate "method". The teacher, like the student, the researchers who do language analysis and study learning and language acquisition, and the other interested agents of EFL (English teaching officers of government agencies; writers, publishers, and booksellers; national and transnational language school franchises; local and overseas teacher training institutes and graduate programs; travel agencies; professional associations; corporate human resources divisions) are all implicated in a complex and interrelated system of exchange in which conflicting meanings and aims are constantly being negotiated in a marketplace heavily biased by vested political and economic interests. And all this embedded within larger cultural systems which provide the contexts by which these meanings and aims are constrained.

The response of the EFL profession to this major recontextualization has been such concerns as "critical applied linguistics", "reflective teaching" and teacher development, and classroom ethnography. The aim is to understand how teachers and students interact in classrooms to both reproduce and subvert meanings available within the larger context which makes "teachers", "students" and "classrooms" thinkable.

Perhaps the major shift we have experienced is one in which all instances of language use – *and* language learning – are seen as both political and contextualized, *including* the language use that undergirds the formation and practice of teachers and curriculum developers. It is no longer possible to see language *learning* prior to and isolated from its *use*. Situations of teaching and learning are no less situations of *use*, as are situations of use inescapably occasions of teaching and learning. From this point of view, developments such as "writing across the curriculum" make perfect sense – as long as they do not take the form of simply decentralizing an essentially instrumental language teaching enterprise, but rather attempt to bring the learning closer to the locus at which what is learned is socially meaningful and useful.

Here a caveat is in order. As in other complex human systems, shifts in concept and practice begin locally and compete in a dynamic institutional ecology with established species of ideas and behaviors. Much of what I am saying would sound foreign to many EFL professionals. Thirty years ago in Brazil, the great public debate in EFL was whether one should teach to an "American" standard (the "pragmatic" option) or to a "British" standard (the "cultural" option). That debate has subsided in the wake of overwhelming US economic and cultural influence, not as a result of widespread appreciation of academic research on linguistic imperialism, on the ideology of hegemonic standards, or on the appropriation of the colonial language by "World Englishes", even though such ideas have circulated widely in teacher-development venues during the last fifteen years. As mentioned above, most EFL instruction today markets itself as "communicative", even though much of it may still be essentially structural or even grammar-translation and highly rule- and model-oriented. Change is spotty and unequal. While it may be useful to paint a picture of panoramic change as I have done above, this should not be taken as representing homogeneous evolution. Given this state of affairs, I am reluctant to offer anything in the way of generalizations about what "EFL" (Which EFL?) might have to offer WAC studies. On the other hand, considering the contingent and locally-produced nature of knowledge, some might find it useful for me to comment briefly on an approach I have taken as an EFL professional in dealing with an *in situ* focus on composition (in Portuguese) at my university.

About six years ago in informal discussions with colleagues from the statistics department about the nature of texts within rhetorical communities, I attracted the attention of a group of professors who were concerned with the quality of report writing among their fourth-year students in a year-long practicum in which the students did guided consultation with real clients. I was invited to contribute my experience to their efforts at improving the quality of the reports.[2] In discussing student work with the professors and observing the feedback that was returned to the students, I noticed that the focus was almost invariably on problems at the sentence level, and very rarely were sentence-level problems analyzed in relation to the structure of paragraphs (or sections) or to the flow of information. This is a typical response of teachers which has been studied widely in ESL and EFL. Teachers are able to identify points at which a text lacks coherence, or seems to be redundant or too wordy, or appears to be presenting

information in the wrong order, or seems to have skipped important background information; but having identified a problem, the readers either are not able to locate its source at the textual level, or they are unable to express the complex nature of the problem in the limited space of a marginal comment. Not surprisingly, students are then at a loss to extrapolate from the sparse comments to the identification of global problems with the structure of sentences or paragraphs, and most often blindly make the "corrections" indicated by the professor, without reflection or commitment. In an attempt to provide tools for overcoming these problems, in the classes and exercises which I have given (in which the professors participate eagerly), I focus on five ideas:

1. It is not enough for the students to learn the techniques of statistics to be successful professionals; they will also have to develop communications skills. On the one hand, they will have be aware of the pitfalls inherent in the process of discussing a problem (on which they are not an expert and may not have necessary background) with a client, so that they sufficiently understand the problem; and then they will have to be able to communicate what they know about statistics in a way that the client (who is not an expert) will be able to understand. Writing is a highly adaptable technology and is not the exclusive domain of students of literature; they will have to (and can) learn techniques for making their writing clearer to their colleagues and their clients.

2. Writing, like talking, is dialogic; there is no magic formula for "getting it right the first time." Different people have different states of knowledge, and these states have to be explored and updated in order for communication to take place. What is said, and in what order, is a way of calibrating the states of knowledge of writer and reader. Writing is plastic; there are infinite ways of presenting the "same" story, and some are easier to understand than others. Here, I give examples from real reports and show several "rewrites" at different levels of coherence. Students are shocked to see basically the same words become increasing clear as a result only of altering the order in which information is introduced.

3. Language controls the relationship between different types of information with internal signs (deixis, subordination). Here I use a technique common in ESL/EFL, the "strip story". I scramble the sentences in poorly-written and well-written paragraphs and have groups of students attempt to reconstruct them, noting and discussing the clues they use to solve the problem.

4. Writing is only one form of representation; talking is another; drawing is another; making graphs and flowcharts is another. Any one of these forms of representation can help one grasp relationships between parts and can then help one understand the "narrative" that is being conveyed: who are the "actors"; what "events" took place in what order; what information needs to be focused on and what information needs to be guaranteed as background. Here, based on a segment of a student report from previous years, I have groups of students reconstruct the sequence of events and then put their reconstruction in the form of a flowchart which they can compare with the flowchart representations of the other groups.

5. Sentences are structured so as to control the flow of information from old (background, presupposed) to new.[3] Here I illustrate, using poorly constructed and well-constructed paragraphs, showing how sentences link new to old information.

These types of exercises and demonstrations are designed to break down the "mystique" that many students of the exact sciences have in relation to writing. They are followed by homework exercises designed to develop the students' critical skills in relation to each other's writing. They are encouraged to be critical readers of each other's (and their own) writing by preparing group critiques of other group reports.

In the terms of Prator's analysis, the activities incorporate an analysis of language and presuppose a model of the learner as an active agent. The aims of focusing on writing are not presumed to be transparent, but are contextualized within an ongoing and ever-changing set of academic and professional relationships and brought into relief against other unquestioned professional priorities. While "method" is applied, the improvement of writing skill is not viewed primarily as the successful mastery of "technique" but rather as the result of increasing reflection and self-conscious analysis of the communicative situation. Both teachers and students are re-analyzed as communicators in a combined effort to improve professional effectiveness.[4]

What I have described is not, of course, a thoroughly integrated writing program and has not yet been subjected to systematic evaluation. It may serve, however, as an example of what can be done fairly easily within already highly structured and time-constrained programs to increase the cross-fertilization of knowledge across disciplinary boundaries.

[1] In: Celce-Murcia, M & McIntosh, L., eds., *Teaching English as a second or foreign language.* Rowley, MA, Newbury House, 1979. p. 5-16.

[2] I thank the professors of the Centro de Estatística Aplicada, Instituto de Matemática e Estatística, Universidade de São Paulo, for their confidence and encouragement in developing the cross-disciplinary experiment briefly described here.

[3] For a treatment of this approach in ESL/EFL, see Robert C. Weissberg, "Given and new: paragraph development models from scientific English", *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 3, September, 1984.

[4] While the professors have assimilated these approaches and techniques, they still find it useful to have an "outside" voice come in to talk to the students. They believe that the students are more impressed and pay more attention when an "expert" says the same things that they might say. This effect is not to be underrated. Ideas and practices are not valued only for their intrinsic merits, but for the social contexts with which they are associated.