Appropriate Methodology: the classroom context and the institutional context.

Jill Cadorath and Simon Harris

Abstract

Recent discussions concerning the appropriateness of the communicative approach to teaching contexts around the world have focused on the classroom situattion - the suitability of methodologies to the immediate teaching and learning context. This article, taking as its starting point English language teaching in Mexico, goes beyond the classroom and considers the institutional context in which teaching developments are taking place.

Les récents débats sur la pertinence de l'approche communicative dans les diverses situations d'enseignement dans le monde ont porté essentiellement sur le contexte de la classe - les méthodologies conviennent-elles aux situations concrètes d'enseignement et d'apprentissage? Cet article prend comme point de départ l'enseignement de l'anglais au Mexique mais dépasse le cadre de la classe et examine le contexte institutionnel dans lequel sont réalisées les innovations en matière d'enseignement des langues.

Holliday (1984), in his article on the needs of state English language education in other countries, talks of the uncertainty of teachers around the world concerning the appropriateness of the communicative approach to the conditions prevalent in their classrooms. This paper looks at recent ELT initiatives in Mexico, considers their appropriateness with regard to university classrooms, and focuses in particular on the differing views on the appropriacy of institutional contexts in which the development of teachers and their methodologies must take place.

Background: ELT in Mexico

Mexico is undergoing a period of great change and economic development,

partly as a result of the recent signing of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the USA and Canada. In order to capitalise on this expansion of trade and communication, the Secretary of Education has recognised the need for fluency in English and has instigated a programme, supported by the British Council/Overseas Development Administration (BC/ODA), to transform the teaching of English throughout the country.

In a country the size of Mexico, where a centralised system would be impractical, a regional approach has been adopted with the state universities of each region (totalling 34) acting as the backbone for local/regional development. This development was aimed initially at training teachers at university level - in university language centres and faculties - with the intention of promoting a cascade approach, whereby the teachers would train other teachers in their recently upgraded skills, with students as the ultimate beneficiaries.

A teacher training programme of this magnitude obviously requires some time before the effects in the classroom are fully felt, so, to ensure a more rapid increase in language ability, most recently attention has been directed at the learner, with new approaches to learning being implemented, in the form of Self-Access Centres, in order to reach a wider public.

The appropriacy of ELT initiatives
Since 1991, the following ELT innovations have been introduced into the public universities:
* teacher-training at university and senior high-school level in the form of degrees, diplomas and Cambridge COTE (Certificate for Overseas Teachers of English) courses, with the aim of encouraging a more communicative approach within the university language centre classrooms, and, in the longer term, the professionalisation of ELT in Mexico
* the introduction of 2 new MA in ELT programmes based at Mexican universities
* the introduction of Self-Access centres within each university
* new English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses within universities.

This is ELT development on a large scale, but, with national and local government support, and with the enthusiasm of the teachers involved, there is strong evidence, from observations and feedback from students and staff, that the

various steps taken to improve the level of English and of English teaching in the universities, in the first instance, have been appropriate, as can be seen from the following details:

1. The implementation of the communicative approach in classroom teaching.
The initial stage of the BC/ODA development programme focussed on teacher training and included 3-year degree programmes, 18-month Diploma courses and 1 year Cambridge COTE courses. In all cases the aim was to improve the teaching of English in the classroom and to enhance the training capacity of the universitites. As ELT in Mexico has for many years been based on a structural approach, with an emphasis on grammar and translation, the need was seen to be a move towards a more communicative approach within the classroom. For many teachers this has meant a considerable adjustment of attitude and, as with all training courses, the effects are not immediate but are realised when the teacher has had the opportunity to reflect, fully understand the implications, experiment and adapt (Wallace:1991).

The immediate teaching context for the teachers at university language centres would seem to facilitate a more communicative approach. Teaching conditions are favourable, in most cases with groups of a manageable size (up to 25 students), meeting 2 or 3 times a week. Classrooms are adequate, equipped with (or with access to) modern educational hardware. Most importantly teachers graduating from the many training courses on offer are in a better position, and are given the freedom, to make qualitative decisions about the suitability of materials and methods for their particular students. It is becoming possible, as Holliday (1994: 4) says, "to define and create a technology based on good classroom conditions to suit the needs of particular markets. Students come as individuals or in groups to learn English, and the technology does whatever is necessary to provide them with a quality product."

For the first time there is a more systematic consideration of the learners, their needs, and the learning process (see Nunan, 1988; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990) and the focus has been increasingly centred on the common threads of autonomy, responsibility, and the making of appropriate decisions; all of these are of major importance considering that the aim of ELT in Mexico is to make the teacher and learner more goal-centred, reflective and proactive.

2. Increased demands on the teacher as researcher.
Most modern training courses include an element of classroom research and one

of the aims of the new MA courses in Mexico is to form a cadre of teachers/ trainers who will be able to contribute to ELT research capacity and provide a sound academic base for future developments. Indeed, with the emphasis on the reflective teacher, small or large-scale investigation is a desirable element of every teachers' repertoire, with universities expecting to increase their post-graduate activities and to conduct more research. All of these factors mean that the ELT teacher feels the need to keep up with current thought and, if possible, contribute to its development. This is especially the case where new initiatives are being introduced in areas where little research has been done (e.g.Self-Access), and where accurate records of findings and results of the experimental work carried out must be kept to share with others and to prevent the waste of time and effort.

3. The introduction of nation-wide Self-Access Centres (SACs).

In 1992 the Secretary of Education decided to accelerate the language training capacity of state universities by installing in each one a Self-Access Centre. The pioneering staff for these centres would come from among the graduates of the teacher-training courses, who, it was hoped, would be trained in the writing of learner-training courses, the designing of self-access materials and the training of colleagues. As is to be expected, course and materials design had indeed formed part of all training courses but within the contexts of the classroom rather than with the purpose of developing learner autonomy. Nevertheless, there would seem to be a common thread running between the adoption of a classroom teaching approach which takes into account learner- and learning-needs and the introduction of Self-Access Centres, where university students can study the English they need, in the manner that suits them best. (For a more detailed discussion of the role of autonomy and self-directed learning see Dickinson, 1987.) These initiatives can therefore be considered as complementary.

4. The Introduction of English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

With international trade recognised as Mexico's main opportunity for economic success, the need for ESP has finally been recognised. For years ESP has been offered by certain universities but has often been interpreted as teaching General English to groups of specialised people. The result of this misinterpretation of ESP has been dissatisfaction on the part of the clients.

Universities are now under pressure to offer their own students and, in areas where multinational companies have their base, employees of large companies, effective ESP courses. Recentgraduates from teacher training courses are now being asked to design and run them. While further experience or training in syllabus design may be required before these ESP courses fully serve their intended purpose, these teachers are aware of learner- and learning-needs. With a wider selection of materials, most notably for the Self-Access Centres, they will be better equipped as evaluators and producers of materials.

The institutional Context

Since the introduction of these activities in 1991, we have been involved, as trainers and coordinators, in the various programmes in the South-East region, working with teachers from 7 state universities. After three years of close involvement our own awareness of the ambit of appropriate methodology has grown considerably. Despite our concern with contextualising teaching - and learning - needs, we now feel that this has been essentially *classroom-based*, when in fact *institutional factors* need to be formally considered. The teachers are working in a highly traditional environment, where the teaching of English is given a lower status than other subject areas and where any change to this situation meets with resistance. It is the effect of these factors on the professional development of the teachers that we shall go on to consider.

Re-thinking context in methodology: beyond the classroom

In the preceding section we have described recent ELT initiatives in Mexico, and have argued that, in these teaching and learning circumstances, they are methodologically appropriate. We have suggested that in this situation the dictates of sustainability - the multiplier effect (see Holliday and Cooke, 1982) - have encouraged a sensitivity to local context and its realities in project planning, and an 'adaptable, environment sensitive communicative approach' (Holliday, 1994) as an organising framework for teacher training programmes. On pragmatic as well as pedagogic grounds this 'ecological approach' has been grounded in what has been termed a reflective model of teacher education and training (Schon, 1987; Wallace, 1991). In Mexican terms we saw this as meaning that teachers should increasingly be in a position to make their own decisions, to develop their own locally situated methodology, drawing on what they get from their training, what they have already, and what they elaborate

and construct through continuing practice and reflection.

Whatever its form, methodological innovation and its local translation take time. The problem that increasingly presented itself was that once teachers were back full-time in their work context there was not sufficient time for the kind of practice-reflection cycle essential for the development of experiential knowledge (Wallace, 1991:15), which would ensure 'internalisation' and 'ownership' of methodological ideas and techniques. This lack of time is a common complaint in most teaching situations; however, in our own situation the time devoted to this process during training contrasted so greatly with the allocation of time it receives in the institutional context that it seemed to warrant closer attention, particularly in view of long term project aims.

We wanted to clarify our ideas through discussion with some of the teachers involved in our training courses. However, rather than a careful or comprehensive survey, ours was an informal exploration, in the tradition of action research (see Nunan, 1989; Allwright, 1993).

Teachers and time

We talked to 10 teachers from 5 different universities in the south-east region. This was a roughly representative sample from the 20 who had taken a Cambridge COTE course and the 40 who had completed the ODA supported Regional Diploma in English Language Teaching. One of our aims was to find out more about the extent to which teachers felt their working environments were supporting their continuing personal and professional development.[1]

A number of points of interest arose from our conversations, but we shall focus here on the time element. To what extent were we right in our feeling that time was the main inhibiting factor in the development of teachers and, thus, appropriate methodologies? In discussing how exactly time was a constraint on personal and professional development 4 related forms of time pressure stemming from teachers' institutional contexts were identified:

(i) The primacy of classroom time.

In reality teachers spend too much time in the classroom, a consequence of economic reality and administrative necessity. For the universities the only real time is classroom time, for which it pays the teachers the equivalent of 5-10 US dollars an hour. Institutional recognition of additional teaching qualifications usually takes the form of offers of more classroom hours, which

poorly paid teachers find hard to refuse.

For others, the training course had brought new administrative res-
ponsibilities without a corresponding decrease in classroom hours. A coordinator
at a large south-east university, with over 3000 students attending the language
centre, was teaching 15 hours a week in addition to full-time administrative
responsibilities. Moreover, additional administrative duties brought him little
power to influence policy or programming. One English coordinator expressed
the views of others in her situation when she said

*"I would like to do more but I can't... because of administration. I
would like to be more involved in teaching rather than in paperwork...
what comes first is not really what I want to do... I want to prepare
something for my students but I can't."*

(ii) The quantity over quality problem.

The increased levels of curriculum activity and further training opportunities
created by the projects bestow significant exponential value on training
experience: you are invariably asked to be involved in new developments. As
one teacher put it:

*"Sometimes they don't ask or come looking for you... they just assume
we'll be involved... that gives us more areas to work on but at the same
time maybe we don't have as much time to prepare classes. The
institution wants us to get better trained but that affects us wanting to
apply what we've learned... (laughs) Maybe when all these projects
finish we'll have more time for our students."*

In three south-east universities, a teacher training qualification has been viewed
as a basis for a half-time or full-time appointment to key self-access posts. A
graduate from the Diploma course notes somewhat ruefully:

*"Now I'm half time at SAC and only half time in teaching. Some things
I'm able to do here at SAC but some others I'm not and, well, I don't
think I'm doing as much as I could; I mean some things they're inside
your head and you do them automatically, but for some others you have
to do preparation, like materials, more elaborate class plans, things
like that. I just wish I had more time for my teaching hours."*

A variation on this theme is the instant expert syndrome, where teachers fresh

from training courses are asked to write tests, develop courses and generally do things on their own, under time presure, for which their training courses have been necessary but not perhaps sufficient preparation. An example of this is a teacher who, as a result of a successful final Diploma project on designing an ESP course for students in the business administration faculty, was asked by the university not only to implement it the following semester but also to design similar courses for 3 other areas. This is not in place of but in addition to normal teaching duties.

(iii) Low status: less time.
Although the position here is seen as likely to change, principally because of NAFTA, there is still a sense of English and English teachers as the poor relations in the university status table. One teacher noted what he saw as a lack of university initiative in encouraging and supporting teacher development and professionalisation and suggested that this was because

"They're more concerned with other areas of study. Maths, maybe Spanish, are more important than learning another language."

Teachers also commented on the reluctance on the part of some universities to fund trips to project-related ELT conferences or seminars, which they had theoretically committed themselves to support. This reluctance to make time for English teachers was in contrast to other subject areas.

(iv) The lack of collaborative time.
In general, teachers felt that there was not enough time outside the classroom for professional development, particularly intra-institutional forums for discussion and presentation and inter-institutional seminars and workshops. Although universities are providers of an increasing number of opportunities for English teachers, there is also a feeling that on a day-to-day basis they could do more to support professionalisation and development. According to one teacher:

" *There is not enough networking or collaboration inside or outside the university. We don't have time to have these kinds of meetings... only informally."*

" *People at your institution don't usually recognise your efforts on improving... they don't say 'oh, she's got a course in this so we'll give*

her time for research.'"

It was noteworthy that 5 out of 10 interviewees attributed the unhelpful professional environment as partly due to the attitude of colleagues. As one put it:

"One problem I see, and I think it's serious, is their attitude towards change. Some people are reluctant to change."

Apart from anything else, the absence of a concerted effort made it harder to exert pressure for change and increased university support for development initiatives:

"...if there are 20 people and only 2 or 3 want to have a course, we can't have one because there are too few... they won't open up a course for us and they won't give us time."

And once again, time and the frequently multi-institutional commitments of a teacher's working life prevented better coordinated efforts at self-help:

"I know there are other colleagues who have the disposition to do it (attend seminars, organise meetings in the university) but we can't co-ordinate ourselves because of the time... they're working different institutions and different hours."

Process and product

Of course we are aware that to some extent we are begging a number of important questions concerning the exact nature of the training courses provided, the state of teacher knowledge, and its consequent development on a short and long term basis (see Freeman and Richards, 1993; Edge, 1994; Richards, 1994). We plan to address these questions elsewhere. The present paper in fact represents something of a ground-clearing operation by attempting to clarify the notion of a teaching and learning context that programme planners and evaluators will need to consider.

Our interviews did seem to point up an important tension between a teacher's view of training and an institutional view, with possible consequences for the rate and ultimate accomplishments of teacher education and development. Teachers tended to see their training as a process that needed time and a supportive environment; institutions saw training as a product, which once provided then became a much needed renewable resource, deployable in an

increasingly varied range of contexts, and one which required little from the institution in the way of conservation and nurture.

Conclusions

The situation we have described concerns a particular area of a country which has seen a surge in ELT activity in the last 3 years. But the description probably fits other parts of the world where the need for change and the implementation of several new ELT initiatives at the same time have resulted in an increased awareness that teachers and institutions may respond in different ways to the implications.

In contrast to Holliday (1991), who looked at the relationships between expatriate project advisers and local classroom and academic-professional culture, our own discussion of the institutional context has focussed on intra-cultural rather than inter-cultural tensions. At the centre of these tensions lies the paradox of a teaching- and learning-centred approach finding a place in a classroom methodology but meeting with insufficient support in a non-teaching - and learning-centred institutional context.

There are no easy solutions to this problem but we would like to propose 4 areas in which action should be considered:

1. Project Planning - a greater involvement of administrators and directors must be ensured so that a wider range of views and expectations is taken into consideration.

2. Teacher Training - a reconsideration concerning content and emphasis in training courses with more prioritisation of collaborative develop-ment and the socio-psychological aspects of institutional organisation, as well as formal attempts to revise departmental structures and proce-dures.

3. Management/Administration Training - the involvement of non-teach-ing personnel in the training process.

4. Academic Development - the expansion of training at masters and doctoral level, and greater encouragement of research and publication at all levels, to enhance the possibilities of increased status, power and financial reward for the language teaching profession within the university context.

Notes

1   A series of questions and prompts served as a basis for structured conversations with each teacher lasting 45 minutes to an hour. These conversations were taped.

References

Dickenson, L. (1987) *The Role of Self-Instruction in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Edge, J. (1994) 'Towards Communication in and about Second Language Teacher Education'. *TESOL Quarterly* 29/2: 395-400

Freeman, D. and J. Richards (1993) 'Conceptions of teaching and the education of second-language teachers'. *TESOL Quarterly* 27/2: 193-216

Holliday, A and T. Cooke (1982) 'An Ecological Approach to ESP' in Waters, A. (ed.) *Issues in ESP*: 124-143 Oxford: Pergamon

Holliday, A. (1992) 'Intercompetence:sources of conflict between local and expatriate ELT personnel'. *System* 20/2:223-34

Holliday, A. (1994) 'The house of TESEP and the communicative approach: the special needs of state English language education'. *ELT Journal* 48/1: 3-11

Nunan, D. (1988) *The Learner-Centred Curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Richards, K. (1994) 'From guessing what teachers think to finding out what teachers know: the need for a research agenda'. *TESOL Quarterly* 28/2: 401-404

Schon, D. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Wallace, M. (1991) *Training Foreign Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge

The Authors

Jill Cadorath and Simon Harris are currently working on a British Council/ODA-funded project for teacher development in Mexico.