Perspectives
Perspectives

This section features: (1) reactions of readers to articles and reviews published in the *Journal* and the replies of authors to whom the comments are addressed (if forthcoming) and (2) viewpoints and opinions expressed in the form of a report, commentary, or interview on issues or topics of current interest.

Cette section sera consacrée à deux types d'articles:
1. La réaction des lecteurs aux articles parus dans la revue et la réponse de leurs auteurs, s'il y a lieu.
2. Les points de vue et les opinions, présentés sous forme de comptes rendus, de commentaires, de chroniques ou d'entrevues, sur des sujets d'actualité ou d'intérêt général.

BUILDING MULTIPLE BRIDGES: ECLECTICISM IN LANGUAGE TEACHING [1]

Carlos Yorio

What I have to say today about eclecticism in language teaching is very simple and very complex. It is theoretical and it is practical; my views are, in fact, based both on theory and on practice. Eclecticism is unthinkable for some people. S. Krashen (1982), for example, contends that eclecticism is unacceptable because it is theoretically abhorrent while other people, like W. Rivers (1981), recommend an eclectic approach and feel that it is eminently sensible. I personally feel very strongly that an eclectic view of language teaching is not only the most sensible but also the most sensitive way of approaching the language classroom.

There are several problems with talking about eclecticism: problems of definition, problems of explanation, problems of coverage and problems of application. I will discuss these problems in turn below.

The first issue is one of definition. Eclecticism is a philosophical approach and method in which selection is based on what is considered best from different systems or sources. In ancient Greece the term eclectic was applied to philosophers who neither attached themselves to any recognized school, nor constructed independent systems, but, in fact, selected whatever pleased them from any school. The application of this definition to language teaching methodology is, I think, obvious and does

not need to be made explicit at this point. My definition of eclecticism, however, does not include, as Widdowson puts it, "an excuse for irresponsible adhocery" (1979: 24 3), but, in fact, the exact opposite; in my view of eclecticism, we choose what is best, what is most appropriate, given a set of learner/student variables, teacher variables and situation variables.

This, of course, is not easy to do since it requires that we analyze all variables and know all pedagogical approaches and techniques, so that we can match them perfectly. One of the weaknesses of eclectic views as they have been discussed in our field is that we are not offered any guidance for selection of methods and/or techniques. In other words, we are told that eclecticism is desirable, but we are not told how to practise it. And there is good reason for this: we don't know how to do it. We do not have the tools to analyze all learner and teacher variables and it is unlikely that all of us will know all of the methods and techniques. Still, I think that eclecticism is best. In fact, I am convinced that it is best because of what we don't know. In my view, if we have only one bridge, one way of getting to our destination, not all of us will make it. Only multiple bridges will do.

People who find eclecticism abhorrent on theoretical grounds are people who think that their views on second language acquisition explain all phenomena (psychological, sociological and linguistic), and that all their explanations apply to all learners. If everything were so clearly understood, then obviously one pedagogical approach would be suitable for everybody. I, for one, don't think that we have all the answers and I don't think that the answers that we do have apply to all learners.

So what are we left with? How can we be eclectic if we need to know everything and we don't? I will try to offer a compromise solution. We don't have all the answers but we do have some; we may not know all the methods but we know some and can learn more. Not doing anything because what we have to do is difficult is unacceptable. In 1965, when accepting the American Book Award for his novel *Herzog,* Saul Bellow said:

> There is nothing left for us novelists to do but think. For unless we think, unless we make a clearer estimate of our condition, we will continue to write kid stuff, to fail in our function, we will lack serious interests and become truly irrelevant.

What Bellow was saying about novelists could be easily applied to ESL teachers. If we sit back and complacently continue to do what we were taught to do when we did our teacher-training, regardless of who our students are or what they want or need, we will become truly irrelevant. The match between need and service would be at best haphazard; in fact, it would be in most cases a waste of our time and our students' time.

92

Let's get a little more specific. First, there are two conditions that must be met. The first one has to do with history: it is essential that we recognize that second language teaching has been going on for centuries and that development and growth are still going on today. We must accept that our personal history in the field is brief and its scope relatively narrow if we compare it to the history and scope of the field. L. Kelly (1976), from the University of Ottawa, puts it well in his magnificent *25 Centuries of Language Teaching.* He says:

> The creative artist seeks inspiration from the past, but transforms the idea in taking it over, as did Bartok, for instance, with the contrapuntal techniques of Bach. Language teaching has shared neither the honesty nor the self-knowledge of the fine arts. Whereas artists are willing to seek inspiration from the past, teachers, being cursed with the assumption that their discoveries are necessarily an improvement on what went on before, are reluctant to learn from history. Thus it is that they unwittingly rediscover old techniques by widely differing methods of research. (p. 396)

Once we recognize that second language teaching did not begin with us and did not end when we got our teaching certificates, we must take the second step — we must open our minds. All of us tend to be very egocentric and ethnocentric. This is natural — we tend to see the world through the eyes of our own experience. This is not very good for an ESL teacher, however. We also need to learn to see the world the way our students see it. If we thought that we could teach English the way we learned French when we were in college because it worked for us, we would be making a serious error. This is an obvious example, but we fall into this trap in many more subtle ways all the time. Never assume that the bridge that got you where you are will be just as good for your students; never assume that the bridge that you built is the only one possible, or the best. Open your eyes and your hearts, and look around, at your students and your colleagues; only then will you begin to understand the why, the what and the how of eclecticism in language teaching.

Now that we have the right attitude, now that we see ourselves in relation to the field of ESL, we must step out into the real world. Our task is a political activity. Our students are the future of the world. This is not a metaphor; this is literal. Our students are our future workers and professionals, our future unemployed and unemployable — also our future social failures and, yes, our criminals. The linguistic tools that we give them are part of the equipment with which they will forge their futures — and ours. We must see our task in the long range. It isn't what students do in our classes that counts. It's what they will be able to do when they leave our schools, to find their place in the world. It is essential that we

understand what we do in relation to that world if our aims and our students' aims are going to coincide. Mary Ashworth (1984), in a paper given at the 1983 Toronto TESOL Convention "'Fifth Business' in the Classroom", gives us an excellent framework for analyzing and understanding our role/s in relation to the world. She describes various "forces" which affect classroom teachers, forces that can be destructive or constructive; forces that have to be analyzed and dealt with. They are:

1. international forces
2. national forces
3. social forces
4. institutional forces
5. pedagogical forces
6. economic forces
7. commercial forces.

Depending on our level of involvement: government official, program administrator, classroom teacher or materials writer, these forces will affect us more or less directly, more or less significantly.

If these forces are destructive, they must be combatted; if they are constructive they must be utilized. This is what we as professionals need to do in order to serve our students.

Now that we understand our place in the cosmos, what do we do on Monday morning? It should be clear to you that what I have taken so long to say simply means that you must take a good look around you, at your students and colleagues and at what you do. And this is where we have to face the issue of coverage. There is so much to look at, so many variables to take into account! How much should we look at? This obviously will depend on what we do. If we are government officials, we have to look at the structure above us in terms of expectations, resources, and obligations, and we must look at the people that we serve: agencies, institutions, personnel. If we are program directors or administrators we will look at our administrative superiors and at the program and staff under our responsibility. A classroom teacher will look at his/her institution and program and at his/her students. Notice that all of us, in one way or another are links or bridges and that our task is to facilitate the various crossings. In this profession, if we are "doing our own thing" we are probably not producing as much as we should, or providing as rich a service as we could.

In what remains of this paper, I will do two things: first, I will develop the notion of the classroom teacher as a link between the institution and the learner, and second, I will relate this role to the actual teaching task. I hope that this will accomplish two objectives: make classroom teachers

94   TESL CANADA JOURNAL/*REVUE TESL DU CANADA*

aware of ways of analyzing variables and of how to translate these analyses into an eclectic approach to classroom teaching. In other words, I'm not going to give you a formula for eclecticism, but rather, a frame of mind.

One of the functions of the ESL teacher is political. He/she has responsibilities toward the institution on the one hand, and the learners on the other. These two constituents must be made to relate to each other through the classroom teacher.

This means that in order to be effective, the ESL teacher must understand his/her institution: its organization (the hierarchy, the command relationships, the responsibilities), its goals (its official external mandate and its internal purpose in relation to its students) and its resources (what kind of support can the institution provide us with, what can we realistically expect, how far can we push without alienating it, how much discretion do our immediate superiors have in relation to resources, and so on).

The classroom teacher must then look closely at the ESL program of which he or she is a part. The ESL program is rarely the actual institution, and often its strengths and weaknesses and indeed, its fate, are linked to the institution of which it is a part. This applies to salaries, benefits, and working conditions on the one hand, and to course requirements, credits (or lack of credit), attendance, grades, etcetera on the other.

An understanding of the curriculum, if there is one, is essential. This entails understanding placement, promotion and exit criteria, level description and syllabi, and methodological approach. If we teach in a program that has, say, four levels and we are teaching a class at level two, it is essential that we understand clearly what this means. What can we expect our students to know? In other words, what is level 1? What are we expected to teach them so they can be promoted to level three? In other words, what is the syllabus for level 2? And how are we expected to deliver (or teach) this level 2 syllabus? If our school has a curriculum or a stated educational plan, we cannot teach anything without understanding that plan — it would be irresponsible. In other words, in order to teach level 2, we must know levels 1 and 3! If, on the other hand, we work in a program that has no educational plan, we must design one, however informally, with our colleagues or fellow-teachers. If we are alone, without fellow-teachers, we must design it for ourselves. We must have some vision of where our students are and where they are going. Teaching in a vacuum would be irresponsible; it would be like randomly handing out leaflets on a street-corner.

Having an institutional curriculum is not necessarily always good. If the curriculum is bad or inappropriate or insensitive to the needs of the students, our problem is how to satisfy our students' real needs without

compromising their institutional standing. That is, if there are tests that they must pass for credit, promotion and graduation, we must train them for those tests regardless of what we think of them. We must do so, however, in such a way that we also satisfy our students' real language needs. If we want to fight the tests and their validity, we must do so by dealing with the institutional hierarchy or organization, never by simple sabotage which might compromise our students' standing.

Finally, we have our colleagues. The word "colleague" comes from the Latin *collegium* which means "association or community of fellows". We should never think of our colleagues or fellow-teachers as "persons who also work here" or "the guy who teaches next door" or "the woman who teaches in the morning". Colleagues are committed professionals who have the goals that we have and who may have as many doubts, ideas, questions and answers as we have. We don't need to wait for the yearly TESL conference for this. Collegiality (in the Latin sense) is around us all year long; let us not underestimate it.

Let us now look in the other direction, in the direction of the learner. We must learn to see each learner as a "collection of variables" that we, as classroom teachers, have to learn to understand and deal with. These are not variables in the exact same sense as a researcher would use the term variables. We can think of these as learner characteristics that may play a very significant role in what our students do as learners and what we should do as teachers. There are two major kinds: educational background characteristics and socio-psychological characteristics.

Among the educational background characteristics we have: L1 literacy, educational level, special skills, L2 proficiency in all skills, individual learning strategies or preferences, and so on. Among the socio-psychological variables we have: attitudes, motivation, self-esteem, home environment, social-environment, among others.

Although there are tests to measure these constructs, tests that researchers in L2 acquisition and educational psychology have devised and used, classroom teachers will have to use "estimates" that are much more impressionistic and general. Because of the tentative nature of these estimates however, it is essential that classroom teachers use them only as guides, and that they be seen only as general scales (strong/weak or supportive/non-supportive). Because of our own experiences, either personal or work-related, we tend to take certain variables for granted (degree of literacy in L1, contribution of the home or social environment, or self-image). In terms of these variables, a student in an intensive program in a university is likely to present a different profile from that of a refugee in an English in the workplace program. Please note that I said likely: that is only an assumption on my part, a dangerous assumption that might color, wrongly, the way I view and teach my students. In fact, if

you do a systematic analysis of your students' characteristics you will find that, like the proverbial rainbow, they range from red to violet, passing through orange, yellow, green, blue and indigo.

There are two opposing dangers here. One is that because we, as ESL classroom teachers, may not be able to determine accurately, for example, how well a student reads and writes in his/her native language, we will ignore the issue. The opposite danger is to come to a conclusion that is erroneous, believe that it is accurate, and proceed accordingly. The issue here is one of consciousness raising and sensitivity. A little guess is a dangerous thing, but so too is obliviousness. A Hispanic student attending classes at Lehman College, for example, probably lives in a Spanish neighbourhood, in a Spanish speaking home and leads a Spanish social life (including radio and television). The only place where this student ever hears and has to use English is in his/her class. Clearly, the home and social environment are not linguistically supportive, despite the fact that this learner lives in a city that is arguably "English speaking" in a country that is arguably "English speaking". The reality of these students' lives cannot be ignored and ways must be found in the ESL program to maximize the English language input. We do it, for example, by using conversation tutors, or listening assignments based on specific English language television programs, or listening/reading self-study programs in the language laboratory. Factors like attitude, motivation and self-esteem are known to be important in second language acquisition. How can we, as classroom teachers, deal with them? Teachers always ask me how to motivate their students. I find this a most embarrassing question — embarrassing because I don't know the answer. At Lehman, this is a very serious issue. Nobody in the Bronx goes to college who isn't motivated and yet, student behavior appears to contradict this motivation (lateness, no homework, and so on.) It was clear to me that the problem was too generalized to be left to the ingenuity of the classroom teacher and that it had to be dealt with at the program level. So I did my "bridging" task, went to my superiors and got them to hire two counselors in order to deal with the students' attitudinal and motivational problems. The interesting result is that we are finding out that the problems are not really poor attitude and low motivation, but actually frustration due to low or slow achievement, poor study habits and time management, and low self-esteem. We don't know if this type of counseling will work but the counselors are certainly being kept busy. I should hasten to add that not every student feels the need for this kind of counseling. In fact, some students have told us in no uncertain terms that "there is nothing wrong with them and that they don't need psychiatrists." Like almost everything else in our program, except class attendance and final exams, this is optional. The language laboratory, self-study programs and tutorials are

also optional. In some student opinion research that I did at the University of Toronto some years ago, and which was reported in the *Canadian Modern Language Review* (Yorio 1986), I found two interesting facts that are relevant here: one is that there was never 100% agreement, and second, that the trends varied depending on proficiency level and language background. Any monolithic approach to pedagogy is likely to hit some and miss many. And this has often little to do with the relative merits of that approach. It may have to do, rather, with how well it matches the individual profile of each student as determined by the constellation of variables that make up that student.

And now, the question remains to be answered, how do I choose what is most appropriate?

First we must be well-informed, resourceful and open-minded. We must read as much as we can about methods and techniques, attend conferences and workshops, talk to colleagues and be willing to try anything, at least once. We must remember that our students do not know about gurus and trends and that each one of them may have different strengths, weaknesses, needs, strategies, opinions and beliefs. If a student of ours believes that his problem is vocabulary and that the way to learn vocabulary is to memorize vocabulary lists, we will not be able to persuade him easily that in fact vocabulary is learned through language use, through reading and talking and writing. So let's strike a compromise: let's tell him that we will give him vocabulary lists if he will read stories and write summaries for us. He will feel better and probably learn more. There is ample evidence in the L2 acquisition literature that students have opinions and that their opinions of what is best for them, and our opinion of what is best for them do not always coincide. And who are we to say who is correct? If we look at the history of second language teaching as H. D. Brown (1978) did, we will see that trends come and go approximately every twenty-five years. We will find, also, that at any time, different people are telling us different things: "Don't let your students talk at the beginning; they need a lot of comprehensible imput" (the Natural Method, Total Physical Response), or "Let your students do all the talking; the teacher should never talk" (the Silent Way). Or you will hear: "Use authentic material in authentic communicative situations", and you will also hear, "You must use controlled material — for learning to take place you must follow the i + 1 principle not the i + 32 principle". Or you will hear that grammar should not be taught explicitly, at the same time as Newbury House puts out a large volume called *The Grammar Book,* an instant best-seller written by two of the most respected professionals in the field — Marianne Celce-Murcia and Diane Larsen-Freeman (1983). Advocates of the teaching of writing as a process suggest that we deal with meaning and organization first and that after a series of re-writes, gram-

matical errors will have taken care of themselves and that, at most, we *may* have to do a little bit of editing at the end. Students at Lehman don't buy this: they have written a petition to me with a copy to the Dean complaining about teachers who refuse to indicate the presence of formal errors after their first draft. Their argument is that they will not improve by writing the same errors over and over again.

Who is right and who is wrong? In a funny way all of them, but obviously not in every case, and not in relation to everyone. So why not compromise, explaining to our students that many ways are better that one way, to paraphrase Earl Stevick (1980): why not follow your students a little more and expect them to follow you a little less; why not believe the gurus a little less and listen to your common sense a little more? You should know your own students much better than Gattegno, and Lozanov and Wilkins and Krashen, and, yes, Yorio. If you build multiple bridges for them to choose from, I'm sure they'll have a much better chance of getting to their destination.

FOOTNOTE
1   This is the Ian Gertsbain Memorial Lecture delivered at the Annual Conference of the TESL Association of Ontario in November, 1986. The style of the speech has been preserved.

REFERENCES
Ashworth, M. (1978). 'Fifth Business' in the classroom. In *ON TESOL '83*. J. Handscombe, R. Orem and B. Taylor (Eds.). Washington, D.C.: TESOL. 257-263.
Brown, H.D. (1978). The development of TESOL: Sizing up the elephant. In *ON TESOL '78*. C. Blatchford and J. Schachter (Eds.). Washington, D.C.: TESOL.
Celce-Murcia, M. and D. Larsen-Freeman (1983). *The Grammar Book*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers.
Kelly, L. (1976). *25 Centuries of Language Teaching*, Second Edition. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers.
Krashen, S. (1981). Lecture on the monitor model delivered at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, Canada.
Rivers, W. (1981). *Teaching Foreign-Langugage Skills*, 2nd Edition. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
Stevick, E. (1980). *Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers.
Widdowson, H. (1979). *Exploration in Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Yorio, C. (1986). Consumerism in second language learning and teaching. *The Canadian Modern Language Review, Vol. 42*, (3), 668-687.

THE AUTHOR

Carlos A. Yorio is Professor of Linguistics at Lehman College and The Graduate School of The City University of New York. He also directs the ESL Program at Lehman. He taught at the University of Toronto for 10 years before moving to New York. He is a Past President of the TESL Association of Ontario and a former Second Vice-President of International TESOL.