

Australian Council of TESOL Associations



ACTA Background Papers No. 1

Finding and Showing the Way: Teaching ESL in the late 1990s

Alan Williams

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ACTA President's Foreword

The 1990s have been a challenging time for TESOL. In this paper Alan Williams puts the changes in context, and summarises some of the key drivers to changes that are affecting our work. He offers constructive suggestions as to how the profession might position itself in the current context. The role of the teacher in changing times is under constant renegotiation.

In commissioning this paper, ACTA hopes to stimulate debate and discussion with its members associations, and also to provide the background to some of our current paradoxes and dilemmas.

ACTA thanks Alan Williams for contributing this paper.

Chris Howell

November 1998

Finding and Showing the Way: Teaching ESL in the late 1990s

Alan Williams

'May you live in interesting times'. So goes an often quoted Chinese curse. Looking at some developments that have affected Australian ESL teachers in recent years, one may come to the conclusion that we have collectively had this curse bestowed upon us.

We are living in difficult times. Profound changes have engulfed us and our work in recent years. Undoubtedly, the biggest issue confronting us is how we face up to and react to these changes. In this paper, the nature of these changes is explored, and some starting points for our professional reactions are suggested.

In order to understand what has and is happening, it is worth reflecting on where we have been. In contrasting this with where we are now, we may be able to better understand the issues that confront us, and to develop ways of going forward that will enable us to regain our now diminished sense of purpose and optimism.

The way we were: the role of the ESL teacher in the late 1980s

We may be tempted to look back to the 1980s with a touch of nostalgia, and there are some reasons for doing that. It was a period in which the TESOL profession in Australia reached maturity. It was also a time when the public was increasingly cognisant of the multicultural nature of Australia. Inquiries into ESL funding in the late 70s (Galbally 1988; Campbell 1985) found that needs were not being adequately met and that increased funding and resources were required. It was a time of increasing professionalism, as teacher education courses specialising in ESL became increasingly available, and professional associations found their feet. It was a period of expansion in the ELICOS sector. The effect of these developments was to produce self-assured teachers who could operate in cohesive networks, informed by research and theory generated in other parts of the world as well as locally, who could persuasively and persistently articulate the needs of their students and their role in meeting those needs.

Our professional role at that time could be defined in the following aspects of our work:

1. Teacher

During the 1980s we moved to distance ourselves from the 'remedial' tag that was often attached to ESL in the 1960s and early 1970s. We saw ourselves as language teachers, teaching the English language largely to immigrants in Australia, and as providers of cultural orientation to new and recently arrived immigrants. As such, we were informed mainly by the emerging communicative approaches to language teaching, which emphasised teaching language use to students in contexts that would be of relevance to them. We were also increasingly looking at

how we could prepare our students for mainstream classrooms, at times even going into mainstream classes with them through team teaching. In this climate, we made significant contributions to practice in TESOL, including very early innovations in content-based language teaching, such as the 'Topic Approach' of Bill Cleland and Ruth Evans (Cleland and Evans 1988)—although this ground-breaking work went largely unheralded internationally. Another innovation in Australian ESL teaching were genre-based approaches, which have recently gained much more international recognition (Hyons 1996).

2. Program planner and leader

ESL teachers in schools at this time had considerable responsibility and autonomy in how they structured their ESL program, how they determined which students to include and exclude, and the ways in which they would deliver support. Teachers in the adult sector generally also enjoyed considerable autonomy in their teaching, and innovative material was developed at this time (e.g. Corbel 1985).

3. Advocate

ESL teachers also functioned as advocates for ESL students and their families within the ESL programs in which they taught. This frequently meant intervening with other teachers on behalf of students on academic matters and other aspects of life in the relevant educational program. We also acted as advocates for families and cultural groups in the school in the development of school policies and practices.

4. Consultant (to colleagues and the school)

Related to this role as advocate, ESL teachers also came to take on a role as consultants on the learning needs and language demands of students, and on the development of appropriate teaching strategies for dealing with students of non English-speaking background. In the adult sector this was paralleled as teachers of English for Academic and Occupational Purposes developed and refined courses using techniques derived from techniques such as discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistics.

TESOL programs of all types became much more professional and focused in developing materials and effective teaching practices, and in structuring programs to meet the needs of their learners, which were increasingly recognised as being quite diverse and complex.

Our concerns

In this context our overriding concerns focused on improving our students' English, their self-esteem and self confidence, and helping them to understand their new environment. We were concerned with ways in which our teaching was linked to other areas of the curriculum, and we experimented with both organisational structures (such as team teaching) and curriculum innovation (such as content-based language teaching and genre-based approaches). Our rhetoric was based on notions of fairness for our students, notions of how we could empower them and provide them access to and equity in a range of benefits available in both the educational system and society at large. Our arguments were student-centred, based on notions of need, justice, fairness, equity, and respect for cultural difference.

In this context we generally felt good about our work. We felt needed, and even when we weren't appreciated, we felt that what we were doing was important and ultimately valued somewhere (though more often than not we were appreciated by our colleagues). We felt loyal to our students and felt an obligation to do the right thing for them — to give them a chance.

However, while this all sounds nostalgic from this distance, things were not always as good as this brief sketch implies. There were glitches in policy and funding, such as in 1987, when funding to ESL programs was dramatically decreased. Policy and curriculum frameworks were loose, and it was often a matter of luck for students as to the quality of teaching and support they received. There was unevenness in the levels of provision and approaches to teaching between different schools and centres, not to mention between different states, territories and education systems. Newly graduated, inexperienced teachers often found themselves responsible for programs that placed excessive and impossible demands on them. There was ample room for less than adequate performance of our responsibilities.

Looking back now, these circumstances seem very different from those that exist today, although of course many aspects of our work remain constant. But we are now working in a very different environment, one that places different demands and expectations on us.

The late 1990s: changed dimensions of our working environments

Changes in educational culture and practice have been quite marked in the past decade. However, so too have changes in our society in general. Before exploring the changes in our educational environment, it is worth considering some changes in our society at large, which have had considerable impact on our work. In addition, there have been trends and developments that are particular to education that have had an impact on our professional lives.

External to (beyond) education

The politicisation of immigration and multiculturalism

Most of our work in TESOL in Australia stems from the fact that since the end of World War 2 Australia has had a consistent intake of immigrants with non-English language backgrounds. A consequence of this has been the creation of a culturally diverse population, and rather belated recognition by government since the early 1970s that, first, this is a good thing, and second, that policies need to be in place to protect and nurture such diversity. The continuation, size and nature of Australia's migrant intake was a matter of bipartisan agreement until the early 1990s, so it was not a matter of debate or even of much discussion. Although the notion of multiculturalism attracted some controversy, until relatively recently the fact that Australia had produced one of the most cultural diverse societies in the world, with minimal communal conflict, was a source of national pride for many.

There have been significant changes in recent years. Immigration is now a topic that generates considerable political heat, and there are groups calling for a complete cessation of immigration. The process of politicising immigration probably began in the mid 1980s when Geoffrey Blainey claimed that limitations to the tolerance of ordinary Australians meant that the proportion of the migrant intake comprised of people from Asia should be drastically reduced. Since Blainey's

initial outburst, others have stepped forward to question national immigration policy, or aspects of it. These have ranged from some who argue their case on genuinely held beliefs about the harmful ecological consequences of population increase, through to those who are happy to invoke similar rhetoric to mask more culturally discriminatory motives. Pauline Hanson is the latest manifestation of this development. The support and fascination she has generated has made politicians and public commentators wary, and there have been few politicians who have been willing to take a political risk and forcefully present a contrary view.

Public discussion of multiculturalism has foundered for similar reasons, in addition to the fact that there seems to be hopeless confusion about the concept in public discussion, with many people having trouble distinguishing between a demographic reality and government policies. Pauline Hanson is an example of this in her claim that multiculturalism can be brought to an end.

Changing patterns of immigration and settlement

The last ten years have seen significant changes in patterns of immigration and settlement, as well as overall declines in the size of the migrant intake. Emphasis has shifted away from family reunion to business migration and to a preference for certain occupational categories. Greater emphasis is placed on immigrants already possessing English language skills. The balance of source countries has altered over the past decade or more, and in recent years new immigrants are settling more in established and middle class areas that have traditionally had little infrastructure for the provision of services for newly-arrived immigrants.

'Competitiveness', the 'global economy' and 'micro economic reform'—emphasis on the observable 'bottom line'

Since the mid 1980s Australia has been concerned with 'competitiveness in the global economy'. This has had two results that impact upon TESOL in Australia. The first has been related to a notion of reducing expenditure in the public sector. The argument is complex, but essentially it holds that a smaller public sector is better in terms of stimulating economic activity, and in keeping tax rates low so that business is attracted to Australia and can thrive. The second part of this concern is the notion of 'microeconomic reform'—the idea that all enterprise needs to be restructured to ensure that it functions efficiently. This generally means the application of private enterprise models to the public sector—making public sector organisations more like private enterprise business.

In order to assess competitiveness and efficiency, numerical comparisons are favoured—so managers, politicians, economists and the media have delighted in finding the 'bottom line', a statistical measure that supports the view that a particular enterprise is efficient or inefficient. Where possible, this is related to 'world's best practice', where the figure is related to similar measures in other countries. If such a figure isn't available, an interstate comparison is made. So smaller teacher-student ratios are seen as more efficient, and hours spent on a task can be calculated to investigate 'efficiency' and so forth.

Australian TESOL has been caught up in this in two ways. First, since it is predominantly public-funded it has been caught up in general 'downsizing' in the public sector. This has been exacerbated by the application of the notion of 'user pays' that is increasingly being applied to public sector services. In our case, this has seen the introduction of fees paid by new arrivals who score lower on a test administered by DIMA. As most people in need of assistance with ESL

in Australia fall into lower income groups, there are difficulties in maintaining services as this principle is applied, resulting in further downsizing of the public contribution to ESL programs. The privately funded fee-paying TESOL sector (mainly ELICOS) has of course recently been reminded of its dependence on global economic trends, as the downturn in the economies of Asia have limited the ability of prospective students to afford courses here.

The application of notions of microeconomic reform to TESOL has led to drastic changes in funding models, such as the widespread application of tendering in the adult ESL sector. These procedures have created some difficulties, but have probably also produced some benefits. The most significant problem, however, relates to the difficulty we have in producing quantifiable 'bottom line' figures that demonstrate the value of our work. Never mind the attestations of students, the anecdotal evidence, or even the comments in the international literature of our field that the AMEP is the leading international best practice in terms of language provision for adult immigrants. These count for little or nothing in a context which devours statistical measures. Our dilemma is that our field is complex and diverse. There is no single measure of the impact of our work, and any attempt to produce one is not likely to produce a valid measure. In a climate craving single measure 'bottom lines', we are in a position of weakness.

The ascendancy of 'change'

Many of us have known for a long time that in the last half of the 20th century change is the only constant in our lives. But the last decade or more has seen an acceleration in the pace and the significance of changes. Change has come to be seen as a sign of a dynamic and successful society. In the ABC documentary series 'Labor in Power', Don Watson, who was one of Paul Keating's key advisers when he was Prime Minister, boasts that one of the achievements of Labor was that it succeeded in a cultural revolution, in the sense of change *per se* being seen as good. This has created an environment where any change is deemed to be good, and where those resisting or even questioning change are condemned as suspect or 'out of touch'. Indeed, reforming zeal is such that it is not unusual for the second and third waves of a series of changes to be implemented before the consequences of the first wave of changes has become clear. Managers now emphasise their abilities to initiate and implement processes of change. A manager whose only justification of their performance is that they successfully kept an organisation on an even keel over a long period is not the type who wins promotion or even holds onto her or his position.

Accountability/expectations of (economically defined) outcomes of education

Since the late 1980s, there has been a coalition of interests that have wrested control over education from educationalists. The reasons for this have been complex, and the processes by which this has happened even more so. Essentially, the view is that education is vital to the nation's competitiveness in the global economy, and so is too important to be left in complete control of educationalists. Politicians, bureaucrats, business groups and (under Labor) the union movement, have come to assert control over the education system at a macro level, based on the notion that the education system has to produce *what the economy needs* in terms of human resources. This has been particularly evident in the implementation of national training frameworks, the development of key competencies for schooling, and the development of VET especially in schools. Education is increasingly related to preparing people for participation in the

work force, and less in terms of development of the individual or even in terms of an informed population who can intelligently participate in democratic processes.

The notion of 'provider capture'

A less visible phenomenon, but one which has had a significant effect in attempts at lobbying in a number of welfare oriented fields, has been the apparent acceptance by bureaucrats and politicians of the notion of 'provider capture' (Marginson 1993). This essentially holds that public services have been 'captured' by the professions that provide them. This means (the argument runs) that professional groups such as teachers or welfare workers see the fields as their domains, and use them to further their own interests rather than those of their clients. In lobbying terms, it means that the arguments of professional groups don't need to be taken very seriously, and that others, such as politicians or bureaucrats, can take the initiative in decision making, without considering the views of the providers involved, whose views are either tainted or flawed because of the self-serving nature of the professional groups.

Within Education

'Self-managing' schools

Although the move in this direction has been uneven in different parts of Australia, there has been a trend to decentralisation of certain administration functions in education away from centralised bureaucracies to schools within government systems. This often takes place within a tightly confined area of administration, and involves the setting up of what has been called 'centralised decentralisation' (Kalantzis 1990). This means schools making decisions in their own interests, rather than following centrally framed policies about provision for particular groups of students (although this still continues in many respects.) In some states, such as Victoria, this has coincided with an end to zoning, and schools have been encouraged to compete against each other for students. In essence, public schools, for better and worse, are being required to operate more like their private counterparts. This is often occurring in a context where smaller schools are being closed or amalgamated with neighbouring schools.

The result of this is that decision making has become more about the interests of the school, rather than about meeting the needs of particular students or groups within the school—although in happy circumstances (including some ESL programs) effective meeting of a community need is perceived to be in the interests of the schools.

Centralised curriculum frameworks

At a period when administration functions have become less centralised, curriculum frameworks are becoming more centralised. This is true in both the adult and schools sector in ESL, even though in schools there have been different degrees of curriculum centralisation in each state.

In the adult sector the use of accredited curriculum and assessment frameworks has been one means by which quality assurance is provided within a tendering process. In the schools sector, each state and territory has recently either developed or revised its curriculum and assessment framework in years K/P–10, following the work done on the national curriculum statements and profiles between 1988 and 1992. Broad-ranging ESL statements or documents have been either developed or have become mandatory for the first time.

In ESL this is a relatively new phenomenon, for with the exception of year 12, ESL teachers have been used to designing their own curriculum and planning their own teaching. In most cases now there is not only an ESL curriculum framework but also a series of KLAS (Key Learning Areas) that our students need to access and be assessed in.

Ascendancy of the notion of 'literacy'

The International Year of Literacy in 1990 resulted in a considerable increase in public awareness of and interest in literacy. In many respects this is a welcome development. However, for those with a concern for the development of bilingualism in individuals and in multiculturalism in society, these developments have been problematic.

This stems from two reasons. The first is that in public discussion and policy formation, literacy is taken to mean literacy in English (only). Concern about literacy in other languages, or even a view of how literacy in another language may contribute to the development of literacy in English, are seen as largely irrelevant or unimportant. This is partly because this concern for literacy has been largely fuelled by an educationally conservative 'back to basics' move that alleges that schools and modern methods of teaching have been ineffective in developing literacy skills in students.¹

The second relates to the relationship between concerns with the development of literacy and teaching in a second or additional language. In general, the adult sector has been several years ahead of the school sector in confronting and dealing with this issue. This issue arises only partly out of students who are in need of both literacy teaching and ESL teaching. Such issues seem to be generally resolved at the local level. It is more a difficulty at the policy level. Here the difficulty lies partly in the fact that contemporary understandings about literacy (among literacy professionals, rather than among politicians and sections of the media) are broad-based and holistic in nature. Literacy in many respects equates to language, as literacy is seen more as certain behaviours and attributes, rather than as mechanical skills to be mastered. Spoken language, numeracy, and critical thinking all come to be components of literacy, and therefore need to be attended to in assisting people to become 'literate'. Such views are reflected in policy statements on literacy (Commonwealth of Australia 1991), in funding arrangements such as those recently announced for 18-24 year olds, and in DEETYA grants to states, which bundle money previously allocated specifically to ESL general support into larger bundles earmarked for 'literacy'.²

¹ The extent to which such claims have any validity is a complex issue, but a matter of continuing media interest. My view is that Lo Bianco & Freebody (1997) sum up the situation effectively when they conclude that there is no evidence of a general 'literacy crisis' in Australian education, but that several groups (including Aboriginals, some ESL students and students from certain socio-economic groups), and many individuals, consistently underperform in relation to what is expected of them in literacy tests. (Lo Bianco and Freebody).

² Some systems have had little difficulty in continuing to run designated ESL programs within such arrangements. Others, however, such as the Catholic Education Office of Victoria, which has traditionally had very strong and effective ESL programs, have designed all (non-LOTE) language provision as 'literacy'. In these situations, explicit ESL provision has continued more by good luck than by design, when 'literacy consultants' and teachers who are aware of the dimensions of literacy learning in a *second* language, are able to provide teaching and other support to ESL students, who in many cases are the majority of students in schools that no longer have designated ESL programs.

The point is that while it is often relatively simple for ESL and literacy teachers to liaise effectively in providing for the needs of students at a local level, the popularity of literacy (in English) as a worthwhile goal and outcome in education, along with broad-based conceptions of literacy in policy and funding arrangements, have left ESL as a field in a difficult position, where its role is to support literacy in English provision for native speakers. For many in the profession, this revives memories of the inappropriate and unproductive nexus between ESL and 'remediation' that characterised many ESL programs in the 1970s.

Greater pressure on resources: more expected of less (people, time and money)

In the current climate there is a general tendency to expect more of people working in many parts of the workforce. But not only is more expected, it is expected in conditions where the resources traditionally provided to perform these task have either been cut back or replaced with 'new technologies', which may have the potential to provide more for less in the short term, but which require considerable time and investment in the initial stages. This tendency is especially true of education.

Our role

While to some extent the aspects of our role as ESL teachers remain—that of teacher, advocate and consultant—our roles are increasingly being defined in terms of the new context in which we are operating. Our roles are becoming increasingly defined in the following terms:

- As deliverers of learning outcomes specified in curriculum documents and elsewhere. These are increasingly defined in relation to outcomes in the terms of the relevant curriculum or assessment framework, whether it be ESL-specific or more general. Our role is seen as essentially helping our students to achieve these outcomes.
- As the providers of specialist teaching which is central to the provision of a more general education for full fee-paying students. In this role we are seen as either providing the bulk of the teaching for ELICOS students—and keeping the customers happy—or of acting as back-up for such students who may be experiencing difficulty in schools and other educational institutions.

These roles tend to position us more narrowly than we have positioned ourselves (and been positioned) in our roles as consultants and advocates.

We feel

In this new context, our sense of ourselves as a professional body has been changing. We have lost the self-assuredness we possessed in the 1980s, as we grapple with these issues, and as many among us grapple with the fact that opportunities to enter and remain in the profession are limited to a series of relatively short term contracts. It seems that the following are the terms in which we see ourselves at present:

- *under threat*, in that we need to be alert to a range of threats to our abilities to meet the needs of our students

- *unappreciated*, in that others no longer seem to recognise what it is that we have to offer
- *undervalued*, in that we seem to be seen as dispensable at policy levels, in some cases at system level, and in some cases at school level
- *defensive*, in that we need to justify ourselves and our work to others
- *undermined*, in that our core values, concern for and empowerment of those who have particular needs, along with valuing and appreciation of diversity, seem to no longer be so widely accepted.

Another factor that exacerbates these general feelings is the changes in the employment patterns within the profession over the last ten years. The move toward funding through tendering processes in the adult sector, and the tendency in school systems to appoint new teachers on fixed term contracts, means that there is a gulf between different groups within the profession. This gulf is mainly, although not exclusively, based on length of experience in the profession. While there have always been areas where teachers are employed for specific terms only (especially in ELICOS), in recent years new employment on any other basis has been unusual. This has led to a situation where the future in the profession for its most recent members is quite uncertain. At the same time, many more experienced members of the profession are employed on a continuing basis, although in some places the security of this status has been diminished. The effect of this gulf in employment conditions has been to reduce the sense of unity and common purpose, and to create a sense that different groups exist within the profession. (It has also meant that some promising but relatively junior teachers have left the profession.)

So we are in a situation where we feel less optimistic about our role and the way we are seen by others. This is exacerbated by changing patterns of employment within the profession, which create different insecurities and concerns for different members, resulting in a diminution of the sense of cohesiveness.

Foundations for ways forward

In painting this brief sketch contrasting our circumstances of a decade or more ago with now, it is easy to be alarmed and consider ourselves in a state of extreme crisis. While the seriousness of our current situation must not be underestimated, we also need to be on guard against knee-jerk reactions that can leave us in a weaker position than when we began. It is worth noting that in the sketches I have painted, the 1980s were not as wonderful as aspects of that situation may appear in hindsight. Nor are all dimensions of our current circumstances as bleak as my picture may suggest. We have a number of factors in our favour that will help us to find our way(s) forward. We will never be the same as we were in the past—but that is the situation of any group of people at any point of time. There is the potential for considerable diminution of our profession if we make the wrong moves. There is also considerable basis for a strengthening of our profession if we can make the right moves. Such moves will be developed at a variety of levels: individual teachers to some extent, but largely in our collective units as faculties within schools, as staff within language centres in the school and adult sectors, as TESOL professionals within the multitude of programs in which we work, and particularly in our state, territory and national TESOL professional bodies.

In order to identify productive ways forward, we need to reflect on our foundations. This involves:

- understanding ourselves, and appreciating our abilities as language teachers, and as specialists within the teaching profession. We have considerable knowledge about and skills in relation to delivering education to students of culturally diverse backgrounds. While our expertise is concentrated on the teaching of language (including literacy) to these students, we have expertise in delivering other areas of the curriculum to such students, and can make useful contributions to the efforts of our non-specialist colleagues when we act in support and consultancy roles.
- understanding our environment and the prevailing conditions in which we are working. We need to be keen observers and interpreters of the forces that are shaping our working situations, and the lives of our students.
- thinking strategically. We need to be able to 'read' developments in order to be able to position ourselves and attempt to shape the events that will impact on our students and ourselves. We need to anticipate, to look for opportunities as well as dangers in changing conditions. We need to recognise our own strengths and limitations, and we need to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the ideas, and the people who are instrumental in shaping the circumstances that impact on our lives and our students.

'Ways to Go'

In responding to changing circumstances, we need to adjust our rhetoric in order to realign it with the prevailing concerns. A weakness of our profession is that we have tended to couch our arguments in moral terms. We have been so sure of the justice of our positions and our concerns that we have been unable to see that arguments based on concern for people and on a sense of what is socially just are no longer adequate to convince others, whose concerns have either moved away from criteria of social justice and fairness, or who are swayed by 'the mood of the times'. The difficulty we have in realigning our rhetoric is living with a feeling that we are somehow compromising ourselves by appealing to agendas that we don't really believe in. But we have to acknowledge that if we are going to influence the bigger picture, we need to connect with those who are either shaping the agenda, or who are influenced by those who are. This means that we need to build on and expand our traditional rhetoric, which emphasised the needs of our students and the fairness of addressing those needs. We need to show how doing this will enhance the society at large, and benefit not just our students. We need to show how the things we advocate will actually improve 'the bottom line'.

In arguing that this is what we need to do, I am not suggesting that there are not already voices among us who are doing just that. But I am suggesting that such an approach is what we need to implement at every level of our profession, from those on the executives of professional associations to the teacher in the smallest ESL program in the smallest school. We need to speak in similar ways to maximise our impact.

To do this I am suggesting some starting points for the types of argument and rhetorical positions we need to adopt. What they amount to are arguments about how we as a professional group can enhance the broader educational programs we work within, and how a fostering of appreciation of cultural diversity can enhance and enrich our society as a whole. Some of the points we need to make:

- argue that what we do enhances the schools and the educational institutions and programs we work within
- emphasise our abilities in assisting and ensuring the realisation of learning outcomes for students from non-English speaking background across all areas of learning
- argue for the social and economic benefits of multiculturalism (not only its moral significance and worth) to Australian society as a whole
- emphasise the contribution we can make in efficiently facilitating 'literacy' outcomes for students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

We need to look for opportunities in new structures and in changing patterns of professional life. We also need to be alert to the obvious and subtle threats that have the potential to overwhelm our students and ourselves. But we need to think about how we react to these in ways that will also help us to move forward.

To argue that we need to appeal to current agendas, including those we may not agree with, is not to argue that we should compromise our core beliefs and values. On the contrary, we need to better understand the nature of our core beliefs and values. But what we need to work at is projecting those core values and beliefs in ways that are forceful within the prevailing discourses and paradigms. An analogy can be made with chameleons, who have the ability to change their outward appearance to blend in with their surroundings, so that they can avoid being 'picked off' by predators. But despite the changes and adaptations in external appearance, the inner core of the creature remains the same.

The threat we face as a profession is that we may lose our ability to assist our students, through being seen as irrelevant or self-serving by others who do not understand the possibilities of what we have to offer. We need to avoid the danger of clinging to a rhetoric that is nostalgic in nature—that romanticises a former period when things didn't seem nearly so bad—just as we need to avoid the danger of believing that all that is new (or changed) is better. Our biggest danger lies in relying only on the moral force of our arguments. At all levels of the profession, we need to be realistically projecting ourselves as people and as a group that have much to offer to others in light of current circumstances and concerns. In this way we can show others that the things we hold important can help them find better ways of doing whatever it is that they want to do.

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Summary points

- In the the late 1980s, we as ESL teachers generally felt good about our work. We felt that what we were doing was important and was valued by the community at large.
- A decade on and things have changed considerably. We are now working in a very different environment, one that places different demands and expectations on us.
- Immigration is now a contentious topic, and greater emphasis is being placed on the need for immigrants to already possess English language skills.
- The dominant view in public life today is that all enterprise needs to be restructured to ensure that it functions efficiently. This generally means the application of private enterprise models to the public sector.
- Education, of course, is not exempt from this philosophy. There is a view that the significance of education lies primarily in the extent to which it contributes to the nation's competitiveness in the global economy.
- Concern about literacy in other languages, or even a view of how literacy in another language may contribute to the development of literacy in English, are seen as largely irrelevant or unimportant. Coinciding with this is the conservative move towards a 'back to basics' educational program.
- To meet these challenges, ESL teachers need to couch their views and concerns in a language that the bureaucrats and politicians will understand, rather than in overtly moral terms. Arguments based on concern for people and on a sense of what is socially just are no longer adequate to convince others. We need to stress that our concerns are aimed at improving the 'bottom line'.
- Failure to do this could result in us being seen as irrelevant, and ultimately it is the students who will suffer if this happens.
- At all levels of the profession, we need to be realistically projecting ourselves as a group that has much to offer to others in light of current circumstances and concerns.

Notes on the Contributor

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ACTA AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF TESOL ASSOCIATIONS

MISSION STATEMENT

ACTA is the national coordinating body representing all teachers of English to speakers of other languages. It aims to promote and strengthen English whilst supporting and respecting people's linguistic and cultural heritage. English is the language of public communication and the lingua franca for the many different sociocultural groups in Australia, as well as a major language of international communication. For full and effective participation in education, society and in the international arena, competence in English is necessary.

TESOL is the teaching of English by specialist teachers to students of language backgrounds other than English in order to develop their skills in spoken and written English communication. At the same time, TESOL teachers strive to be sensitive to the diverse linguistic, cultural and learning needs of individuals.

TESOL draws on a knowledge of the nature of the English language, first and second language acquisition, crosscultural communication and appropriate curriculum, materials and methodology for multicultural contexts. It is an integral part of the broader social, educational and political context. It can inform and be informed by this context.

As a program, profession and field of study and research, TESOL shares certain understandings and practices with the subject English as a mother tongue, child and adult literacy, languages other than English (LOTE), and bilingual and multilingual education, but also has distinctive characteristics.

ACTA'S OBJECTIVES ARE:

TO REPRESENT AND SUPPORT THE INTERESTS OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH TO
SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES

TO ENSURE ACCESS TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHER
LANGUAGES

TO ENCOURAGE THE IMPLEMENTATION AND DELIVERY OF QUALITY PROFESSIONAL
PROGRAMS

TO PROMOTE THE STUDY, RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT OF TESOL AT STATE,
NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

ACTA Background Papers No. 1

Finding and Showing the Way: Teaching ESL in the late 1990s

Alan Williams

This essay examines the role of the ESL teacher in the context of today's sociopolitical culture. Williams begins by describing the conditions that pertained in the late 1980s, and then compares this picture with the state of the discipline today. What is clear is that circumstances have changed: multiculturalism has been politicised, 'corporatisation' is everywhere, and many ESL teachers feel that their work is not appreciated as much as it once was. Williams argues that the profession may need to adjust its approach, though not its core values, if it is to continue to progress into the next millennium.