Perspectives

Power, Politics—and Persuasion:
ESL in Changing Times

Nick Elson

I would like to begin by looking at education in a rather general way before focusing more specifically on the particular concerns of ESL. What follows are a few items, events, and observations that I think do something to indicate the context in which we work. I offer these without comment or analysis, although I assume some occasional editorial bias will show.

A recent educational supplement in the *Globe and Mail* (October 15, 1996) carried in a headline the term *Just in Time Education*, a reference to the concept of *just in time inventory* used by manufacturers to avoid stockpiles of expensive parts. In the same supplement an article headed "This School Means Business" concludes, "Although Gorden Graydon [a high school] has to adhere to the provincial curriculum requirements, it always keeps the bottom line in mind. 'When we do something by Shakespeare, we explain why it's relevant today, then how it applies to a business venue,' says principal Ray Beyer."

In a widely reported speech last year, the President of a Canadian bank lamented the state of Canadian education and what he saw as the tendency of the system to produce workers apparently unsuited to working for his organization. He had, needless to say, some suggestions for how this situation could be corrected.

In Ontario the Ministry of Education a few years ago released substantially revised curriculum guidelines that put new weight and emphasis on the arts. At the same time funding cutbacks resulted in the virtual obliteration of positions for teachers of music, painting, drawing, or theater.

The Youth News Network (YNN) has approached school boards in a number of provinces including Quebec, Ontario, Alberta, and Nova Scotia. The idea is to offer 12 minutes of prepared television news, including two minutes of commercials. In return, school boards will receive televisions, videos, a satellite dish, and other audiovisual equipment. Following the established American model, schools were expected to sign long-term contracts, agreeing to organize compulsory student viewing. The equipment features a computer chip that monitors how often the show is viewed and for how long, ensuring that teachers do not cheat by actually teaching instead of having students watch the show.

I will refrain from more detailed comments on these selections, but two perceptions appear to me to link these items in a troubling way. The first is the implication that the teaching and learning process is reducible to a mechanical, input-output process that lacks only a little tinkering to become more "efficient" and "relevant."

The second theme at work is what Saul (1995) calls *corporatism*. From this perspective, schools are simply one more marketplace to be exploited and, ultimately, to serve the economy. In my local supermarket children (usually female, I notice) can get their own little shopping cart to push around. Attached to the cart is an antenna with a flag reading "Customer in Training." I suspect that this is merely a "cuter" version of the deal that Pepsi signed with the Toronto Board of Education giving it exclusive rights to place its products in school cafeterias.

Any school subject area that cannot be seen as contributing more or less directly to economic gain tends to be both suspect and devalued, and the forces currently driving educational change appear to have little connection to any sense of what constitutes a true learning experience. In general, some have observed, education is regarded as an expense, not an investment.

The buzzwords that swarm around discussions of education like angry bees are not taken from the lexicon of teaching and learning, but at best from the vocabulary of education as a system, and at worst from quick-fix business fads popularized in books written for people who have neither the time nor the inclination to pursue ideas in depth.

Consider the following phrases culled from a variety of school board and government reports on *education* that have appeared over the past several years:

downsizing
outsourcing
reengineering
restructuring
accountability
rationalization
outcomes-based education
value for money audits
total quality management
instructional technology

These items reveal not only the influence of the business agenda being applied to education, but a profound lack of understanding of, and appreciation for, the imperfections, the chance connections, the uncertainty, the freedom, the time to think and reflect, and the disorder that are inherent in the true learning process.

Emberley (1996), in *Zero Tolerance: Hot Button Politics in Canada's Universities* observes,

> Whatever the corporate right may say, the process of understanding is unlike the management of information. The engagement of souls in conversation is unlike the transmission and processing of data. Facts can be relayed, feeling states can be conveyed and skills can be demonstrated by computers and video, but nothing can replicate the contact of human beings. (p. 188)

One might conclude that an "understanding superhighway" would be a more valuable development than the "information superhighway."

If we believe that there is inherent value in the process of learning, regardless of its applicability, that there is such a thing as knowledge for its own sake, consider how far removed from that belief is the following from the President of the Institute for Research on Public Policy:

> Education is the cornerstone of our economic well-being, and in the current "information age," characterized by rapidly evolving technologies, it has never had a more important role to play. The heart of our wealth is the knowledge and skills of our population. Our economic development, measured both domestically and against the success of our major trading partners internationally depends to a great degree on our abilities to harness our human resources. In light of the importance of education in a fast-changing global context it is not surprising that many of the assumptions of the past are being questioned. (Emberley, 1996, p. 155)

It would be easy to dismiss the writer, either for lack of any sense of educational philosophy or for the mind-numbing banality of the prose. But we must caution against such an easy discounting. In its reductionist view of education as "information," "knowledge," and "skills" somehow linked with "rapidly evolving technologies," the speaker offers us an insight into the agenda that is currently driving educational change.

In many respects this is the context in which we work today. In view of the hold that this agenda has, we would be naive to think that ESL, given its historical lack of stability at any level of the educational spectrum, could be unaffected.

In this context, in the drive to reduce education in general, and language learning in particular, to the most minimal packaged form possible, LINC programs, continuing education ESL, ESL at the elementary, high school, or university level have no immunity to the upheavals taking place in education. Indeed, one can argue that they are particularly vulnerable. Too often ESL is trivialized and marginalized because of misperceptions of what ESL involves (*remedial, service,* and *training* are some of the code words here) as

well as of those it serves, the immigrants and refugees and their children who have undertaken new lives in this country, groups that characteristically lack access to the social, cultural, and political power structure of the country.

Understanding the Context

If we are to argue effectively for positive change, if we are to protect the essential values of, in our case, effective language teaching and learning, we must take it upon ourselves to examine and understand the larger context in which we function.

If we imagine a series of concentric circles, with our classrooms at the center, we can start to visualize how events that may seem remote from our daily experiences can have an impact on what we do in those classrooms. Each of those circles is porous and fluid: ideas, money, laws, forces of various kinds flow between them, influencing the lives of those who occupy the circles.

What does this image of the concentric circles do for us? For one thing, it tells us explicitly that in order to do our job effectively, to help and support those to whom we are responsible as teachers, and teachers of language, we need to understand the larger context in which we and our students function. Consider what we actually do in our classrooms and how much of what we do is decided, imposed, and expected by people far removed from our classroom and community realities and often from our own sense of the best way to approach teaching and learning.

Our schools, our classrooms, our gatherings of learners in a community center are not isolated pockets of society—they *are* that society. The notion that the learning process can be shut off from the realities of the world outside the classroom is a destructive illusion that causes only harm. That kind of thinking, I argue, represents a failure of professional responsibility.

We must recognize that ESL is a profession and accept that, as ESL professionals, we are involved in a sophisticated, complex, multifaceted undertaking that carries particular demands and responsibilities. And part of this professionalism is to be aware of the social, political, economic, and cultural context in which we teach. This understanding will inform what we do, both in the classroom and in our professional work outside the classroom.

Becoming Agents of Change

When we have the skill of seeing the problems and understanding them, then we need the skills that allow us to do something about those problems. As teachers, administrators, and researchers who care about helping learners, we must be agents of positive change. If we ever harbored any thoughts that we could close that classroom door and do our job in a narrow, isolationist sense, then the present times, which are witnessing unprece-

dented attacks on education, and on ESL, must surely persuade us otherwise. The responsibility for change lies with us.

Smith's book, *Insult to Intelligence* (1986) is subtitled *The Bureaucratic Invasion of Our Classrooms*. He writes:

> Teachers should not rely on outsiders to change the minds of reluctant or disbelieving colleagues, principals, parents, politicians, or anyone else. What is needed is *education,* and it is teachers themselves who must be the educators. Teachers are—or should be—the experts. They should not expect others to be better qualified and more authoritative in changing the teaching world for them. Even if others live up to this heavy expectation, which I think is improbable, it will serve only to underline how ineffectual teachers can be. (p. 246)

We are only powerless if we see ourselves as such and accept, even implicitly, that we are unable to make change for the better.

Part of our difficulty is that ESL is neither well understood nor appreciated for what it involves. Teachers in LINC and other community programs live in a constant state of impending budget doom. ESL teachers frequently describe how their ESL budgets are proportionally less than those of others in the school, that they get the worst teaching locations (broom closets and spaces under the stairs, both literally and figuratively, appear to be two such locations), that the principal would rather add another physical education class than an ESL class or, worse, would rather appoint the physical education teacher to *teach* the ESL class than the ESL specialist. And administrator after administrator makes in clear in a variety of ways that (a) they don't understand ESL, and (b) English can't be that hard to teach, look how easy it is to speak.

I suggest to you that we in the ESL profession are complicit in this situation. To the extent that we encounter these attitudes, it is because we have allowed ourselves to be seen in this way. Often those of us involved with ESL are too quick to assume victim status, the false image imposed on ESL.

In part this is because we have been trained into marginalization. A survey of the descriptions of ESL teacher training courses suggest that it is unlikely we have been exposed to any discussion of leadership and sociopolitical issues as an aspect of the teacher education and training process. And yet leadership skills, political awareness, the ability to identify a problem, analyze it, and formulate an appropriate response are fundamental aspects of professionalism, of pride in our work, and the desire to develop our potential to its fullest.

Professional Competences

The following six competences are adapted from Stark, Lowther, and Hagerty's *Responsive Professional Education: Balancing Outcomes and Opportunities* (1986) and create a useful context in which to assess ourselves as professionals.

Conceptual Competence
- the theoretical foundations of the profession;
- understanding of the knowledge that makes up this base;
- something that is constantly "added to";
- constitutes what we would call professional education.

Technical Competence
- what we usually think of as training;
- ability to perform the fundamental skills required in the profession;
- closely linked to Conceptual Competence.

Contextual Competence
- understanding of the larger social, economic, political setting in which the profession is practiced;
- not only the immediate environment, but the world beyond that;
- involves ability to examine the context from multiple points of view: historical, social, economic, and so forth.

Interpersonal Communication Competence
- the ability to communicate effectively with others through a variety of media and methods and in a positive and constructive way;
- development might involve role play, simulations, videotaping, self-analysis of interactions.

Integrative Competence
- the ability to meld conceptual, contextual, technical, and interpersonal competences so as to make informed judgments about appropriate professional strategies to be employed in practice.

Adaptive Competence
- The ability to alter, modify, adjust elements of professional practice in a rapidly changing society. Involves:
  a. Sensing and detecting changing conditions,
  b. Acknowledging the need to adapt or alter some mode of functioning,
  c. Taking steps to initiate or accommodate the required changes.

This professional assessment framework is even more striking when one considers that it was originally addressing professions such as architecture, nursing, and pharmacy. If my local pharmacist needs, among other competences, contextual competence that allows him or her to perform the job

better, then it is no stretch to say that we in the complex field of language teaching should have the same skills.

This tells us that we have a responsibility to demand effective and professional TESL development courses and to expect in those courses not just the obvious components of language, methodology, and cultural sensitization, but components that address the intent of these competences. In particular, by incorporating contextual, integrative, and adaptive competences, and by giving serious attention to leadership and the identification and analysis of and response to sociopolitical issues, we help the individual involved with ESL to understand how to control and initiate change for the benefit of the language teaching and learning process.

Leadership Roles

An assertive leadership role for the ESL teacher is an implicit part of one's professional responsibilities. Leadership is not just the dramatic leading of a charge against perceived wrongs: it can be a far more complex and subtle undertaking that can as easily be simply speaking out about an issue to fellow teachers, doing background research, or even writing or speaking about a problem to get others involved.

The Activist Professional

However, identifying the problem is only the start. Action is required, and to those who may understandably not see themselves in an activist light, let me quote from Barth (1990):

> To assert one's leadership as a teacher, often against forces of administrative resistance, takes commitment to an educational ideal. It also requires the energy to combat one's own inertia caused by habit and overwork. And it requires a certain kind of courage to step outside of the small prescribed circle of traditional "teacher tasks," to declare through our actions that we care about and take responsibility for more than the minimum, more than what goes on within the four walls of our classrooms. (p. 131)

The following are some basic elements of a Leadership/Sociopolitical Issues component of ESL Teacher Development that acknowledges the realities of the world the teacher is or will be working in:
1. Concepts of Educational Leadership;
2. The Teacher in Context;
3. Professional Development;
4. Program Evaluation;
5. Discussion of Relevant Current Issues in ESL;
6. Leadership Responses to ESL Issues.

Professional Self-Assessment

Another component deserves some attention, and that is the idea of professional self-assessment. If we are to continue to contribute as professionals, we have to assess our professional situation objectively at various stages of our lives. Not to do so may mean that bit by bit we diminish our effectiveness as teachers and our potential to make the sorts of changes that need to be made. Such an assessment process might pose some of the following questions.

1. Is there a positive and supportive link between your personal and professional lives?
2. Do you feel constrained or supported by the context within which you work?
   Do you feel "empowered"? We speak extensively of the process of empowering our students, but much less often consider our own need for empowerment.
3. What are your professional ambitions? What position would you like to hold five years from now? (Ashworth, 1985). It could well be that you need to move on to a position that will make you better able to bring about the kinds of changes you feel are necessary.
4. In terms of the Professional Competences, how well prepared do you feel for (a) your present position and (b) your future aspirations? Do you need to return to school, pursue a professional development course? Just take time away from work to refresh yourself and reenergize?
5. As an ESL professional and an educator, what access to continuing professional development do you have? It is shocking how difficult it is for many teachers to have access even to their local ESL conferences, to relevant journals, and to professional development opportunities, simple basic mainstays of a professional career.
6. What leadership qualities do you feel you possess?
   What leadership qualities do you feel you should develop further?
7. What factors in your present situation support your taking a leadership role? What factors work against it?

The following quotation from Block's *The Empowered Manager* (1987), although not intended for teachers, certainly speaks to the situation many find themselves in:

> The key to positive politics, then, is to look at each encounter as an opportunity to support autonomy and to create an organization of our own choosing. It requires viewing ourselves as the primary instrument for changing the culture. Cultures get changed in a thousand small ways, not by dramatic announcements emanating from the boardroom. If we wait until top management gives leadership to the change we

want to see, we miss the point. For us to have any hope that our preferred future will come to pass, we provide the leadership. We hope that the world around us supports our vision, but even if it doesn't, we will act on that vision. Leadership is the process of translating intentions into reality. (pp. 97-98)

We are, as Block notes, the primary agents of change. We are also the experts, as Smith (1986) observed. We cannot wait for those above us in the hierarchy to create the changes that need to be made, nor can we stand aside as others impose their own solutions with little or no meaningful consultation, often hammering them home with references to "hard choices" or "deficit reduction."

Making Change

Once we accept our role in the process of making change, we must be prepared to persuade others to the validity of our vision.

The following 10 strategies for change are merely a starting point to the change-making process. Undoubtedly these will be improved on by others who are struggling to make positive change.

1. Identify the problem, and document it as well as possible. This may mean talking to many people, reading documents, going to meetings, and working to understand the issue.
2. Discuss your perceptions of the problem with other people; find out what the varying paradigms of the issue are. As the saying goes, "Fishing from the perspective of the fish is not quite the same as that of the person holding the fishing rod." Ask the people involved or affected what their view of the problem is. This might usefully include asking the learners as well.
3. Intervene in the process as early as possible. Once a discussion paper is issued, for example, the decisions have often already been made. In general, take both a bottom-up and top-down approach to the problem. The top person—chair of a school board, elected officials responsible for education, and so forth—may be important, and it may be gratifying to have a meeting with them, but these people are often persuaded to a point of view by individuals lower in the hierarchy who may also be more accessible.
4. Find out who the key people are: trustees, members of the administration, principals, education officers, and so forth and speak with them to try to get them on side on your issues.
   Be prepared to explain how they gain from supporting you.
5. Decide on the appropriate strategies of response. Where are the "hot buttons"? Is there a role for a brief? The media? Meetings? Demonstrations? Are there committees before which one should appear?

6. Use and apply statistics—cautiously. You are dealing with people who spend their days working with numbers. Try to use their figures where you can. If you generate your own, make sure they are solid and supportable.
7. "Alliances," says Fullan (1991) in the *New Meaning of Educational Change,* "provide greater power, both of ideas and the ability to act on them" (p. 349).
   Seek out your allies. Groups such as TESL Canada and its provincial affiliations magnify power and influence, but what other groups, individuals, or organizations have some reason to be interested in the resolution of this problem and would be willing to join their resources, connections, and experience to yours?
8. Don't get fired. You can do more good with your job than without it. Use safe "front" people or organizations to take the issues forward if that will protect and further your cause.
9. Understand the system and how it works. Where and how are decisions made? How is power distributed structurally and how is it exercised in practice? Try to avoid a simplistic and inaccurate them-versus-us stance. To do so simply works for those who want to marginalize you and push your concerns aside. As the concentric circles remind us, our interests are interconnected and a positive approach acknowledges this. There are many fine, concerned, and committed people in educational and government bureaucracies, but they also often need your help to achieve your mutual goals.
10. Be prepared for the long haul. I think here of Block's (1987) comment that "Cultures get changed in a thousand small ways." The best response to pressure from a bureaucratic standpoint is often to do as little as possible while appearing concerned. Nothing changes overnight, so structure your response accordingly. An administrator often has nothing to gain and plenty to lose by giving you certain information or supporting your cause. You need to be able to persuade him or her that there is a mutual interest at work.

I find wonderful resonance, depth, and complexity in the ATESL conference theme "The Changing Faces of ESL." Let me suggest that some of those faces are not of those intimately involved with ESL, but of those outside ESL, even outside education, whose thoughts and actions have a profound impact on what we do. They include the faces of parents, of government officials, of politicians, of the recent immigrant, of the small business owner. Among the changing faces of ESL are those members of society who may never before have seriously concerned themselves with issues in education that they are now often passionately involved with.

Positive change can be made; it has been made; it has been made by people like ourselves. Difficult as times are now for ESL, much progress has

been achieved because of the efforts of concerned and committed people in the ESL profession. There are economic constraints that must be acknowledged, analyzed, and understood, and we weaken ourselves and our arguments if we deny this. We must also make it clear that we are not fleeing accountability; on the contrary, we must affirm on every occasion that our first level of accountability is to those who need our skills and our understanding to help them realize their full potential in our society.

Earlier I used an image of concentric circles to locate us in society. Let me alter that image slightly. There is a ripple effect to what we do in the classroom. Like the pebble that sends out radiating forces when it drops into the pond, the work we do both inside and outside the classroom sends powerful forces out across those concentric circles. We see in such an image that what takes place in our classrooms can influence society as much as society influences our classrooms.

Ashworth's (1985) book *Beyond Methodology* inspired many ESL teachers to look at the sociopoltical context of their work for the first time in a systematic way. It seems appropriate to conclude with Ashworth's 20th Axiom of Making Change.

> If you want to make changes in society you must make yourself vulnerable to personal attack. But remember—the hurt you feel will probably be nothing compared to the hurt presently felt by those for whom change is so desperately needed.Your colleagues may openly laugh at you or make comments about you behind your back.You may be criticized in the newspapers. But if you have prepared yourself properly ... criticism will fall away and support will grow. (p. 111)

Note

The Author

Nick Elson is ESL Coordinator in the Faculty of Arts, York University. Teaching in TESL courses and involvement with political action committees led to an interest in the process of making changes that support the teaching-learning process. His current research is looking at the concept of skills in second language teaching and examining how students' perceptions of themselves as language learners influence learning success.

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