

FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY IN EFL/ESL

Peter Hubbard

A parable:

Once upon a time, there was a young English teacher. Freshly graduated from her teacher-training course and clutching her pristine teaching certificate to her heart, she set forth into the world of language teaching, starry-eyed and bubbling with enthusiasm for her new profession. Her head was full of exciting new ideas which she was convinced would turn her classes into episodes of sheer excitement and capture the spirits of her students and her colleagues.

But once started, she found that teaching was really rather hard work, full of boring routines such as preparing classes and marking homework. The hours were difficult and long, so that she began to look forward to the end of the week and the holidays never seemed to last long enough. Oh, there were good moments too, when she really felt that a class had gone well and the students seemed to be making progress. But the sad thing was that nobody else on the staff seemed to know about her good classes or appreciate her success and, indeed, most of them seemed so obsessed with their own that they were hardly likely to be interested. So she kept these experiences to herself.

Well, the years passed and our young teacher, not so young as before, became an experienced teacher. Somehow, she had never had time to try out all those exciting ideas and anyhow she was beginning to find them less and less exciting, especially since when she did mention them casually to a colleague she was told that they had already been tried out and didn't work. So she concentrated on getting through her work load conscientiously and still looked forward to the weekends or holidays, when she could forget about teaching altogether.

Then, one day, something happened which transformed her life. The Director called her into his office and gave her a

little talk. He praised her solid work and loyalty, and wished that more teachers were as conscientious as she was. He said that her work would be rewarded one day, for she stood a good chance of becoming a head of department. He promised her an office, with a desk of her own and, maybe, if she was very good and patient, a telephone extension. But the best of all was this: she wouldn't have to teach all the time. She would teach a few classes a week and the rest of the time she could just administrate.

Well, our teacher, now not young any more, but in fact approaching middle-age, felt really excited about this prospect of becoming an administrator and could hardly sleep at night because she was thinking about her office with her desk in it and maybe (if she was very good) her telephone extension. And so she spent much of her time speculating about when the next vacancy for a Head of Department would come up. Whenever the Director talked to her she felt very excited, because she was sure that he was going to mention her promotion to administrator, but nothing happened and she began to wonder whether he had forgotten about their little talk. Also, she began to get quite suspicious about other teachers who had had talks with the Director, because she felt convinced that he had promised them an administrator's job. And so she spent the next few years in an agony of hope one day and bitterness the next and struggled furiously to show the Director that she was a better potential administrator than the teachers she had begun to regard as her rivals.

But at last it happened! One of the Heads of Department was offered a better job in another school and she was given the job. She moved into the office, which had her desk with her telephone extension on it and began to administrate. Actually, the administration was rather boring and there were times when she didn't really know what she was supposed to be doing there. But still it was her office and her desk and her telephone. And there was a sign on the door saying "Head of Department". So somehow the boredom was justified.

Well, to cut a long story short, many years passed and our friend, who was now getting quite old and gray, was still administrating away in her office, which seemed dirtier and shabbier every day. She seldom taught any more, because she spent most of her time administrating. When she did teach she found it difficult and exhausting because, to tell the truth, she was quite out of

practice. At one time she had speculated about becoming a director, but she had more or less given up hope of that, because she noticed that directorships nowadays always seemed to go to younger people, with flashy degrees from university. So now she began to look forward to retiring, just as previously she had looked forward to weekends and holidays. Thanks to her generous salary as Head of Department, she had saved quite a bit and there was a retirement pension which would keep her well for the rest of her days.

And so she eventually retired. In gratitude to her long and faithful years of service the school gave her a silver plate engraved with her name and an inscription. This she placed on a table near the television set and from time to time she would glance at it as she watched television in the evenings. But not for long. Because now she could forget about teaching and about administrating altogether. No longer did she have to prepare classes and sit up late marking. No longer did she have to sit at that desk in her office and answer the telephone extension. Now her life was hers to lead as she wished. At last, she was free.

End of story.

This paper is an attempt to analyse in some detail what we often overlook completely or take for granted - that is: how responsibilities are divided or shared in our profession. And I would like to examine, too, the role of the ordinary teacher in this framework and the role of the student, because teachers and students have responsibilities also, though they are seldom clearly defined.

Let us begin by learning some lessons from the ancients. The Spanish word negocio, business, derives from the Latin negotium, which in turn is composed of negare, to deny, and otium or leisure. (You may compare the Spanish word ocio, for example). Negotium then was what denied you your leisure or free time, and was used in that age to include affairs of state, public administration and work in the courts of law, not merely the narrow sense of commerce. For the Romans, otium did not mean, I think, lying in a hammock and drinking 'cubas' or whatever the equivalent was for them. Otium meant time to do the things that interested you - reading, writing, composing poetry, philosophising, inventing, socialising and so on. Otium, then, was your real life - what

you lived for, so to speak; negotium was the burdensome duties that people have to shoulder as part of their everyday lives. In short, and to return to the title of this talk, otium was freedom and negotium responsibility.

I think this linguistic analysis is interesting because it illustrates a particular attitude towards work: That work is the negative side of our lives, that we live for our free time.

Of course, there are well-known cross-cultural comparisons of attitudes to work. Protestant dominated countries are said to be strongly influenced by the work ethic. And an interesting meeting-point for the different traditions is right here in Mexico in our profession, where we have people from both communities working together. Certainly I can think of teachers (not necessarily Mexican or Anglo-saxon in either one category) who live for their work; and of yet others who live for their free time; and again others who mix the two together.

Teaching in ancient times was practically an unpaid occupation. There were tutors, scarcely above the level of slaves, who did some of this work. The real scholars depended on a system of patronage or charity; these people taught because it was their life's work and such teaching and scholarship was not regarded as work. The phenomenon of the paid professional teacher is a relatively modern one and reflects the compartmentalised specialisation of modern life. And so it sometimes happens in our profession that we are confused, not knowing whether we are living for our work or working to live. The truth is that many, I hope most, of us, enjoy our work and are passionately interested in what we do in the classroom. Hence MEXTESOL.

And now - if you will permit me - I would like to make another diversion, this time going back to classical Greece in the age of the city-state about five and a half centuries before Christ. The word ιδιωτης meant a private citizen, that is a person who was purely concerned with private affairs: above all, buying, selling and accumulating wealth. This word had a negative connotation, which survives today in its modern derivative idiota or idiot. In other words, for the Greeks of that day you were an idiot if you were not interested or actively engaged in public affairs or politics. And it was the duty of every citizen or πολιτης to be aware of or to be engaged in politics.

How things have changed! Now the word idiot simply means foolish or mentally-retarded and politics is practically a dirty word - and this in every country of the world.

Why have I wasted your time with these obscure philological journeys into the past? Because I wanted to make a connection with two things that have become inextricably bound up with our profession: negocio, making a living; and la grilla, politics. And I wanted to show that these elements have always been present in civilised societies and that, whether they be viewed as negative forces or not, they are very much a reality and one which we have to accept as an integral part of our profession, like it or not. So let us not - any of us - try to pretend that our profession is geared purely to academic matters and above such things as money or political power. Academic work is always tied up with these things. On the other hand, it is not necessary to regard them as essentially dirty. They may be, but they need not be.

Let us first consider the question of money.

An institution pays money to its staff to retain them and secure their loyalty. This may sound a cynical way of putting it, but essentially that is the reality. Certainly, looking at the converse, staff would not stay if they were not paid as much as competitors pay. Of course, there are other senses of loyalty: staff who have worked in an institution all their life feel a kind of loyalty born of familiarity and long custom. But such loyalty will not survive totally unjust conditions of pay. Calculating how much the staff get paid is a delicate balancing act between keeping the finances on an even keel and reducing discontent.

Then, the salary structure, supposedly, reflects division of responsibility within the institution, plus other factors such as seniority and qualifications. In a well-organized institution there is a bureaucratic policy to determine the exact pay of each individual. What this policy does not and cannot determine is who gets appointed to positions of rank: these are human decisions and therefore subjective. Naturally, these decisions are made at the top and must be based on mixed considerations. One such consideration is the factor of trust or personal loyalty to the decision-maker. Hence we see the mechanism of a system of patronage operating here, as in all other branches of life in Mexico - and other countries too. That is, individuals link their careers to that of a senior and follow him or her through thick or thin.

This system may seem unfair to those who are accustomed to other ways of doing things, but it is worth reflecting that it is a system based on mutual trust and respect. Such trust and respect can only develop out of experience of working together which is the most reliable method of determining a person's capabilities. The weaknesses of the system are obvious: first, potentially capable people from outside are excluded; second, feuding between individuals manoeuvring and manipulating for positions of power, results in occasional falls from grace and hence risks for the follower. Political dexterity is one of the requirements a junior looks for in a boss. For without that, he will not survive; and neither will his followers.

So to summarise my argument so far, we find that in our profession - as in many other fields - an individual teacher (I am not so much concerned here with non-academic staff) affiliates herself to an organisation or institution which attempts to integrate her into a system based on loyalties. These loyalties are essentially personal. That is, one is loyal to certain people rather than the institution per se. This, I think, is the truth. Teachers are happy in an institution if they get on with other members of staff (especially their superiors) and respect the way they do their job. Certainly, when these factors are lacking, teachers are very unhappy. So the loyalties are mainly personal. However, the institution tries to project a corporate image which is also respected. "We are well organised. We look after our teachers. We have high academic standards". However, the truth is that this is a relatively superficial image. Few teachers look closely at the longer-term or global aims of their institution, for example. The role of money in this system is to further cement these loyalties and patch up any cracks in the structure. In other words, it is the last resort element which holds things together. Pay is, however, a secondary means. The core of the institution's structure is the system of personal loyalties I have described. I come now to the question of responsibility. And this is, I suppose, the thesis I have been labouring towards up to now.

If a teacher or other member of the academic staff asks herself, "What are my responsibilities?", she will find this question difficult to answer. Yes, superficially there are simple responsibilities: Arrive at class on time. Prepare your classes well. Be considerate and polite to your students. Cooperate with

your colleagues. Correct the homework promptly. Be organised. These and others are things that we summarise under the heading 'being professional'.

But surely this is not enough. This is an adequate teacher, perhaps. But not a valuable member of staff.

For example, what about the responsibility to improve yourself? Most institutions offer seminars and in-service training courses on a voluntary basis, but encourage teachers to attend these by alternately bullying or bribing them to do so. What about the need to conduct research - either formally or informally? Somebody has to. And if you leave it to universities to do this (normally the case) the results often appear too academic: research has to be done in the field itself. And no one is in a better position to do it than the teacher. What about the need to develop new materials and experiment with new methods? Again, this is work for the teacher. In other words, if all teachers simply came to the school, taught, prepared and marked and attended the occasional meeting, the school's work would remain frozen at a certain stage of development: there would be no systematic progression. The teacher has to contribute in other ways to the work of the school.

You may say that this is work for people in higher positions to do - the coordinators or heads of departments. But their position is exactly parallel to the teacher's. That is they have a set of routine obligations - organising tests, choosing materials, supervising or training teachers. But to go beyond this, to initiate genuine progress and successful innovation, though this is truly one of their responsibilities, perhaps the most important one, it is not written into their job description, though I think it is understood.

Now, fortunately there are staff with sufficient enthusiasm and energy to go beyond their job descriptions and attempt such work. Instead of just keeping the machine running, they design new parts of it or try to improve existing parts.

But the question is: does the institution encourage such action or inhibit it? If staff do such work successfully, do they get credit for it? Are such staff eventually rewarded by promotion?

Well, I regret to say the truth is often otherwise: less responsible directors promote staff on the basis of their loyalty-record rather than their enterprise. Indeed, enterprising staff are often regarded with suspicion, as people who might challenge authority. Promotion then is given to people who are 'sound', rather than those who are dynamic. In other words, there is an inherent weakness in most academic institutions, a built-in mechanism to discourage enterprise, innovation and progress. Furthermore, there is a general lack of a system for channelling and exploiting such potential in all staff, especially those at the lower levels. Research, for example, is seldom conducted systematically by teaching institutions because they do not regard this as one of their functions. And yet it clearly is.

Then what about the responsibilities of the student? And I don't mean attending regularly, punctually and doing his homework. The problem here is that the student's role is traditionally regarded as passive, when we are very much aware that this is not so. Attitudes in language teaching recently have shifted responsibility away from the teacher towards the student. Similarly, the student has a responsibility towards the school (the fact that he is not paid for this is irrelevant, as I have tried to show is also the case with the teacher). The student above all should try to help the school establish clear teaching objectives. And he should provide feedback on the methods and materials used. It is surprisingly difficult to get students to comment on their English classes. Perhaps schools should encourage students to organise themselves into groups to represent their interests. Schools seldom do this because they think students will interfere, but the running of a school should perhaps reflect more of a dialogue between students and academic staff than it usually does.

Then what about the institutions themselves? That is, people responsible for shaping the policy of these institutions and developing a longer-term perspective. Here there is a responsibility to ensure more than just the survival of the institution and its staff. The responsibility is to develop a broad vision of the field of language teaching in national and international education, to see where the institution fits into the scheme over a long term and to develop policies that guide the institution in this direction. There is also a responsibility to maintain true academic standards independently of commercial or political pressures - not always an easy thing to do.

To sum up the position on responsibility, there appear to be two levels of responsibility: the superficial level, which includes routine duties and professional standards; and further responsibility - to my mind, true responsibility - which means going beyond the call of mere duty and exercising imagination, initiative and creative effort. It is my thesis that some staff content themselves with the first level, but that others, the minority, reach beyond this to the second level. And, further, that these few enterprising staff do not receive the recognition they deserve; indeed often meet resistance, negative reactions or even disapproval.

And now this is where politics come in. Merit of the kind I have described is not automatically rewarded by promotion. But the politically adept staff member will recognise that merit plus personal loyalty to the decision-makers will afford a much better chance of promotion or, sometimes, just loyalty will suffice. Hence these people will always endeavour to appear in a favorable light to those with the power to recommend promotion, even when this might conflict with the higher responsibility I have mentioned. When a teacher allows political expedience to prevail at the expense of higher responsibility she is being professionally and personally dishonest. But this is often the path to success.

To be blunt, what I am saying is that most academic institutions are not all-wise, benevolent and far-seeing, but riddled with caciquismo and politics of the lowest kind. Staff who fulfill their functions at the superficial level will probably not come in conflict with this scene; nor will they get promotion - although there are, let's face it, cases of people who get promotion by just sticking around for a hell of a long time. Those who have energy and enterprise will come up against this barrier sooner or later. Then they will either fight it and feel frustrated; or they will play along with it and maybe get invited to join the clique. Neither of these two alternatives are particularly attractive; nor, I am about to argue, are they necessary.

Well, we have talked about responsibility. What about freedom?

Let me remind you of the Romans' distinction between otium and negotium. Otium is freedom to do things that interest you; negotium are routines and responsibilities that drag you away from your favorite pursuits. (As Oscar Wilde said, "Work

is the curse of the drinking classes.")

I think we can see that in our profession otium and negotium correspond quite neatly to the two levels of responsibility I have described - at least for the better quality staff member. Negotium is routine responsibilities that we have to perform anyway; and otium is the kind of projects we can get excited and worked up about, spend much of our spare time on and maybe even write them up into a paper or workshop for MEXTESOL.

Higher responsibility, then, means exercising a kind of freedom. And I have argued that this freedom is often restricted by the political structure of our institutions.

What alternatives are there to the traditional pyramid of power, with all its failings and unhappiness?

Well, I think there are alternatives. Not always easy ones to adopt, but ones which are worth thinking about.

Some institutions elect their higher staff by popular vote. But this, after all, is changing one system of politics for another: instead of caciquismo read demagogia. As we know very well, to be efficient, higher staff often have to put up with unpopularity; and popularity is not necessarily the mark of the good administrator. Certainly not in the short term.

The truth is administration is time-consuming, soul-destroying and often boring. It's a chore which someone has to do. Why is it, then, that administrating is viewed as a job to which one climbs by promotion? Or that administrators have more power (a word I have tried to avoid up till now)?

Noam Chomsky, who is well known as a theoretical linguist, has also made a second reputation for himself as a theoretician of politics and one thesis of his, not perhaps totally original is this:

People who govern are often the least fit to do so and this is because they arrive at their positions as a result of a struggle for power. This is not the best way of selecting public administrators. Public administration is a chore which should be rationed out on an unpaid basis to all, in the same way that a family divides up duties like washing

or emptying the garbage can.

Could it not be that our academic establishments, being supposedly wiser and more open to new ideas, should try to apply this principle to their structure of responsibilities?

For a start we could remove the mystique and the notion of rank from administrative positions. Nor should administrative work per se be higher paid. Staff should be given responsibilities which interest them, rather than those that carry higher prestige or earn more money. Indeed, if staff accept administrative responsibility, it should be assumed that they enjoy doing this kind of work, rather than, say, teaching - not a high recommendation in our profession. Finally opportunity, in the form of paid time, should be given to any staff member who can put forward acceptable proposals for research or development in the field. This, of course, implies a directorship of academic background and inclination, but so it should be anyway.

Let me go back to the story with which I began this session.

The young teacher in question was not allowed to adopt true responsibility, in the sense that I have described. In her school, teaching itself was regarded as a lower level occupation. Teachers were regarded as factory workers; the administrators as management.

I have tried to show that creative growth must be encouraged in all areas of an institution's work and that the teachers' area is arguably the most important of all in this respect.

We call ourselves 'academic' and our institutions 'academic institutions'. Accordingly, the highest prestige and pay should go to people whose work is academic, not administrative. At the highest level this means staff involved in original work in the field of research and development, areas where all English teaching establishments should be active. Staff with the capacity for this kind of work should be given encouragement and diverted into these channels of production.

Language teaching, like so many other fields has allowed itself to become strangled by a self-perpetuating administrative

bureaucracy. Administration is necessary, but it is a chore, a routine duty which should be rationed out, not built up into a mystique. Anyone with a reasonable system to back him up can administrate. It is not a mark of success in the profession nor an occupation to aspire to. Academic staff should remain academic in function - in reality, not just symbolically or superficially. At the highest levels, they should be making valuable and original contributions to the field: above all, they should be academically productive. Because of the mystique of administrative positions, academic standards at the top have become mediocre; and mediocrity at the top tolerates mediocrity below or engenders frustration in the non-mediocre. Most of these higher staff, not all, have become administrators and petty politicians. They are out of touch with teaching and many haven't been inside a classroom for years. Such people are professionally irresponsible.

To conclude, true responsibility in our profession at all levels implies freedom to work creatively. And the structure of teaching institutions should reflect the need for such freedom. In the ideal occupation, freedom and responsibility merge and become one. And when this happens real advances are made.