

NEW ORIENTATIONS IN THE
TEACHING OF ENGLISH

Peter Strevens

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NEW ORIENTATIONS IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH is divided into five main areas: 1) Principle and Theory in Language Teaching; 2) Methodology and Teacher Training; 3) Special Problems in E. L. T.; 4) The Language We Teach; 5) Some Technical Questions.

It could be argued that such a division is so general that a reader ends up getting only a glimpse of the field and is only able to pick up bits of information. Such an argument is valid to a degree. On the other hand, Mr Strevens is able to present material in a manner accessible to the language teacher with the clear objective of making him aware of the elements which are involved in language teaching. If the reader is looking for a specialized text, a bibliography is given at the end with a list of books and periodicals with more specific information.

An important feature which attracted my attention was the writer's ability to present and define terms using clear, concise language - for example, "Approach - A package deal" (p. 4), "Rationale - A set of justified reasons for selecting an appropriate course of action" (p. 86), "Applied Linguistics - The range of intellectual and practical activities concerned with (in L. T.) which, in turn, define it" (p. 37). Such terms are everyday jargon which one never stops to analyse.

There is a common tendency in our profession to regard "experience" as the basis for good teaching. Without questioning the validity of experience, Mr Strevens feels that a "theory component would enable a teacher to acquire an understanding of his actions and their effect." (p. 76). Obviously, this would make a good experienced teacher an even better one.

Because the book aims at covering most, if not all, areas involved in E. F. L. teaching, the reader finds the material in each chapter quite condensed, but analyzed with the precision required. Mr Strevens shows great care in his language and style. A careful division of areas, subjects and topics follow a deductive framework. He does this after a good, brief description of each in the Introduction.

One can argue that some chapters are less relevant than others for language teachers in Mexico. This is true since the writer did not have in mind a specific set of language teachers but rather all those who are involved in the field.

The first part of the book gives a general description of language learning establishing that there are "three equivalent elements: the mind of the learner, the nature of the language and the skill of the teacher" (p. 11). Mr Strevens also maintains that teaching and learning are simultaneous interrelated operations and must be seen as one process with two elements - teacher and learner - performing their specific roles. He also clarifies the difference between "learning" (with the aid of a teacher) and "acquiring" (without the benefit of a teacher) a given language (p. 13).

In Chapter 2 the author classifies syllabus/curriculum into three major areas which he goes on to describe as "linguistically based, situationally based and notional or semantic" (p. 25). His diagram for a model of the LL/LT process is quite effective in establishing the relation among the elements involved in such a process (p. 35).

Chapter 3 describes the relevant importance of Applied Linguistics to language teaching with such precision and clarity that one wonders whether such a field of studies can be as accessible to the language teacher as he implies.

The contents of Chapter 4 relate to the differences between acquisition and learning a language and the specific role that the language teacher has in each of these. Here the implication is that the former relates more to an E. S. L. situation while the latter depends heavily on an E. F. L. formal situation.

Chapter 5 can be thought of as controversial - depending on the teacher's professional background. Personally, I am inclined to agree with the writer's point of view which is that American methodology tends to be more effective in an E. S. L. situation while British works mainly in E. F. L. situations. Mr Strevens feels this is due to different historical and socio-cultural developments in the countries involved. He feels that the American experience in the field has been located more often in the U. S. A. while the British is focussed upon providing English teachers to foreign countries and training foreign teachers in the U. K. (p. 57).

Perhaps because I am involved in teacher training, I felt Chapter 6 was the most interesting. Here, Mr Strevens starts by pointing out that "there are few books and articles which concern directly with the training of teachers as foreign language specialists" (p. 68). He proceeds to

present what he terms "prime elements of the (teacher training) situation". He continues with what he feels would be the "ideal" language teacher and presents a teacher training scheme. He analyses its content in some detail dividing it into three major components: Information, Theory and Skills. He presents some variables which determine differences in teacher training courses and concludes that "teacher trainers are generally convinced that their work is dynamic not static with a constant need for re-assessment." (p. 80).

Chapter 7 deals with teaching oral language and provides some interesting and important guidelines. Mr Strevens states that "teaching is an art", and that "language teaching is one task; establishing linguistic theory (useful for the teacher) is another " (p. 85).

The Chapter dealing with E. S. P. , Chapter 8, presents a taxonomy of E. S. P. divided into two parts: a) types of E. S. P. and b) pedagogical dimensions.

In Chapter 9, Mr Strevens deals with reading which, he believes "consists of making out the meaning of written language" and points out that "an analysis of reading must embody an analysis of writing" (p. 109).

Chapters 10 to 12 deal with varieties of English. His diagram on Standard English presents both the dialects of the language and the corresponding geo-political areas. His distinction between dialect and accent as well as his description of Standard English and Received Pronunciation (RP) make one aware of what these terms represent in the field of language teaching.

The last two chapters deal with technical questions. Chapter 13 presents the language laboratory as an aid which requires certain conditions in order to be useful and well exploited. I felt that the basic thought, underlying his position are similar if not based on the work done by Julian Dakin.¹

Finally, Chapter 14 deals with E. F. L. teaching policies, mainly the administrative side. This is a relevant and interesting chapter for countries like Mexico where there is a Ministry of Education which sets national policies in the E. F. L. field. Interestingly enough, some of the ideas included in this chapter have already been presented in Mexico. Mr Strevens believes that "cost-effectiveness studies of E. F. L. investment-results should be commissioned and carried out in the whole system, for there is little to be gained at a level of a single school" (P. 168).

1. See: Dakin, Julian: The Language Laboratory and Language Learning. Longman, 1973.

To conclude, it is my feeling that Mr Strevens' compilation of his own work, as he states it in the Preface, reflects his experience in the field which has taken him all over the world as well as within the U.K. Thus, it is unlikely that one will go wrong suggesting his book as a basic reference in the field of E. F. L. teaching.

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