

# The Concept of a Cross-cultural TESOL Dictionary

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The globalization of education and technological developments have brought English teachers around the world closer together than ever before. International conferences, e-listservs and international teachers' associations have increased global networking for English teachers. At the same time, they have brought problems of cross-cultural communication, which stem from differences in teaching traditions and educational environments. This paper describes a project to create a cross-cultural dictionary of TESOL terms to enhance professional communication among language educators. We first outline the need for such a dictionary and then discuss criteria for the selection of terms.

教育と科学技術のグローバリゼーションは、今までにない程世界中の英語教師の情報交換を可能にしました。国際的な会談、E-リストサーブ、そして国際教師の協会などが世界的なネットワークを英語教師のために広げました。それと同時に、このようなグループは、教え方や教育環境の違いが元となる、違う文化同士の会話問題を取り上げています。この論文は違う教育文化を持つ教師の為に、TESOL用語の辞書を作る計画について書いてあります。この辞書は言語教師同士の専門的な会話を増大させるでしょう。まず、この様な辞書の必要性を書き出し、そして、どの用語を載せるかについてのクライテリアを見当してあります。

The dictionary project we discuss in this paper has grown out of experience in a particular language-teaching context, namely in the Russian Far East. However, we feel that other teachers throughout the region, and probably around the world, have similar experiences and would benefit from the kind of dictionary we have in mind.

### The Problem

Political, economic and technological changes in the last dozen years have created unprecedented opportunities for professional interaction among language teachers throughout the region. English teachers in Russia now have unprecedented access to professional literature, both on paper and on line, through books, journals, magazines, and newsletters. The Internet offers opportunities for discussion, idea sharing and fellowship through email, listservs, chat rooms and web pages. Membership in international professional organisations, such as IATEFL and TESOL, also brings teachers into contact across frontiers and also fosters a sense of professional community. The opportunity to attend international ELT conferences, both within Russia and abroad, further strengthens the sense of belonging to a wider community of teachers dedicated to improving the quality of teaching.

And yet, communication in such forums is not as smooth as it might appear. Lack of knowledge of

technical terms used in ELT outside the Russian context can often leave teachers baffled by the publications, presentations, email messages or coffee-break talk of fellow-professionals. At the PAC3 at JALT2001 Conference, for example, a group of Russian teachers debated whether to attend a session on “Global Issues in Language Education”: one imagined it would assess the impact of globalisation on the need for English, another that it would examine the impact of English teaching on a world-wide scale. On discovering it would most likely address the teaching of issues such as poverty, war, and the environment as content in language lessons, they decided their time would be better invested in another session.

The discovery of this problem is in many ways unexpected. Are we not a profession which by definition shares a common language? Are we not the envy of many other professions in that an understanding of that language (English, the language we teach) can be assumed in all members of the profession, thus making professional communication in a global context much easier than for, say, engineers or economists?

The fact is that much of our professional discourse (as with any other profession) occurs in a jargon available only to those who are fully acculturated to the discipline. Those who have received their training and teaching experience at some distance from the international community have great difficulty catching up with

the jargon. The existence of an apparently common language merely serves to mask the problem, especially from native speakers of English and those at the heart of professional discourse. Yet technical terms are a problem not only for those non-native speakers who have until recently been relatively isolated from the discourse community; they can also cause problems for teachers in all contexts.

This is particularly true of terms which are widely used in one context but hardly at all in others. The word “juku” immediately implies a whole informal education system for those of us teaching in Japan but needs a substantial gloss for those unfamiliar with Japanese educational practices. Even more problematic are words used in different contexts with substantially different meanings: “team teaching” suggests a partnership of native and non-native teachers working in the same classroom to teach English in Japanese secondary schools, but an EAP teacher and a subject specialist working together to ensure that the subject matter is understood by non-native speaking students in the contexts of British higher education. The usage of words like these is a product of different educational traditions, economic conditions, and cultural heritages which can render them quite opaque to outsiders, whatever their level of proficiency in English.

## Our Solution

As a solution to this problem, we propose a cross-cultural dictionary of TESOL terms as an aid to professional discourse.

Our dictionary will be different from existing ones, such as the *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1992) or Blackwell’s *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Applied Linguistics* (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). These dictionaries provide an overview of the core vocabulary used in the field, giving definitions and notes on usage, but provide little understanding of the flavour of each word when used in particular cultural contexts. Our dictionary will go much further in terms both of words covered and of the attention paid to the cultural background of the terms. We will attempt to be as comprehensive as possible (a dictionary is of little use if it does not include the word you need) and to pay full attention to the geographic, historical, institutional, political and economic contexts from which the words come and in which they are used (a series of contexts for which we use “cultural” as a catch-all term).

Our criteria for selection will include consideration of the needs of the users of the dictionary, the academic fields in which the words are used, and, to a lesser extent, frequency. Our initial intention is to produce a bilingual dictionary which will be of use to Russian

teachers of English. As such, we will attempt to include words which are potential confusing for Russian teachers. An informal survey of colleagues at one university in Russia reveals no shortage of such words. They provided the following definitions for words frequently found in the ELT literature:

- *team-teaching* -teaching students in small groups
- *facilitator* -a teacher who uses different facilities in a lesson
- *technical training*  
-training language teachers how to use different equipment in lessons  
-teaching English to science majors
- *in-service teacher training*  
-training teachers in this country  
-training teachers in particular fields
- *K-12* -no idea
- *peer editing* -no idea
- *international teaching assistant* -no idea

In terms of the field in which the words are used, our aim is to provide comprehensive coverage of terms used in language teaching. Clearly, this will include a large number of terms which have been borrowed from related fields (linguistics, education, testing, etc.). However, our focus will be on the ways in which these words are used by language teachers. We are collecting them from the spoken and written discourse of language

teachers from a wide variety of countries, through interviews with teachers, and analysis of language teaching publications.

Frequency of use has been a main principle of selection for terms used in all previous dictionaries in the field. However, in our dictionary it will play a lesser role, as we strongly believe that our dictionary should be as comprehensive as possible in order to be of maximum help to the user. Infrequently used words which nevertheless occur frequently in particular contexts (such as “juku”) will be included, and only those which are rare across all contexts will be excluded.

### A Provisional Taxonomy

The work of collecting terms is still in progress. So far, we have been able to distinguish the following groups or clusters of words:

#### *False Friends*

Terms which sound similar to words used in Russian but have a different meaning: “English as a Second Language” is often taken to mean English as a second foreign language, since English lessons in Russian school curricula are usually referred to simply as “English” and German and French are often taught as second foreign languages.

“Applied Linguistics” is frequently misinterpreted as English for mathematics and computers.

## *Gaps*

Terms used for situations which do not occur in Russian ELT contexts:

- “Team-teaching”
- “sheltered course”
- “bridge English”
- the “EFL”/“ESL” distinction

## *Acronyms and Ergonyms*

The names used to refer to organisations and professional qualifications:

- “British Council”; “Council of Europe”. These institutional names can be translated in Russian but translation explains nothing of the purposes and structures of the organisations they stand for.
- “TESOL”; “IATEFL”. These are both hard to read and to interpret for the uninitiated, to say nothing of regional organisations such as JALT and ETA-ROC.
- What is to be made of the relative merits of an “MA in TESOL” and an “RSA/UCLES Dip. TEFLA”?

## *Non-Terms*

Terms which do not exist in Russian, although the idea, once explained, may be familiar:

- “Action research”
- “case study”
- “peer editing”.

Often they refer to notions which are relatively new in Russian ELT.

## *Near Synonyms*

Words which are often used as synonyms in daily life but which have been weighted with the transmission of subtle distinctions when used in professional ELT discourse:

- “acquisition” / ”learning”
- “teacher education / training / development”
- “error” / ”mistake”
- “use” / “usage”
- “assessment” / “evaluation”.

Such distinctions are often troublesome for native speaking teachers, too.

## **Conclusion**

The need for a cross-cultural dictionary of ELT terms is clear in the Russian context, and presumably in many others throughout the world. Our work in compiling the dictionary has just begun, but already we are aware of the large number of terms we need to include: words

which, while not designed to do so, often have the effect of excluding from ELT discourse colleagues who have much to contribute to it. Language teachers in particular should be aware of this problem.

## References

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