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Connotations of ELT Terms: Handle with Care

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Familiarity with the terms language teachers use when they talk shop is an important part of the formation of all language teachers in training, as it enables them to join the community of teachers by participating in professional discourse. The meaning of these terms is often far from obvious and a number of dictionaries exist to help with this problem. However, like any other words, ELT

terms carry connotations as well as denotations, which can complicate the task of finding the exact term to express a particular meaning. This problem is particularly acute for non-native speaking teachers.

In this paper, we focus on the connotations of ELT terms; we will examine and categorise examples of such connotations; and we suggest ways in which teacher educators can help teachers to deal with problems in professional discourse caused by unwanted connotations.

Like any other profession or specialised area of knowledge, ELT has its own set of terms and expressions which practitioners use in their professional discourse. Familiarity with these terms is the key to admission to the ELT discourse community; for the uninitiated, they can form a barrier to communication in professional contexts. As such, ELT terms are an important element in teacher development programmes, where they are taught both implicitly and explicitly.

A number of fine dictionaries exist to guide and instruct the new teacher in dealing with these often opaque terms (see, especially, Richards & Schmidt, 1992). These dictionaries seek to give a clear explanation of the denotation of a term and to set its usage in historical and methodological context.

However, like all words, ELT terms carry with them connotations, some good, some bad, which can constitute an even greater barrier to participation in professional discourse than the denotations. A teacher who, for example, does not know that the word “drill” brings with it connotations of by-gone methodology, non-communicative classroom

activities and boredom, will miss much of the meaning of any contemporary text dealing with language activities and wonder why she is looked at askance by colleagues when using the word herself. This problem is, of course, particularly acute for non-native speaking teachers but it affects native-speaking teachers, too.

This paper is part of a larger project, which aims to create a dictionary of culturally loaded ELT terms which are likely to cause problems for Russian teachers of English. The need for the dictionary has been described in a previous paper (Lovtsevich & Ryan, 2002). Here our focus is specifically on connotations, as we believe this to be a particularly problematic area. The scope of the problem is by no means limited to teachers who are native speakers of Russian, but confronts all who would participate in ELT discourse.

Our investigation has led us to categorise the terms into four groups. We offer our grouping here in the belief that it may be useful in bringing specific types of connotation to the attention of teachers, especially those engaged in teacher development programmes.

Four groups

1. Simple good/bad connotations

In many ways, this is the simplest group of terms with connotations to deal with. They can simply be listed as having good or bad connotations.

A glance at the blurb on any contemporary textbook will quickly reveal a list of terms with positive connotations: *communicative, learner-centred, authentic, real-life, autonomy,*

etc. These terms are meant to make the teacher feel good about choosing the textbook, and an analysis of them would show us much about the self-image of the profession. Another group of terms with positive connotations recurs frequently in teacher development literature, conference presentations and journal papers, and includes *critical, reflective* and the word *development* itself.

We are equally clear about what we do not like. Terms such as *Teacher Talking Time, teacher-centred* and *rote-learning* are expected to produce hisses and boos from assembled professionals, with the immediate connotations of “bad” and “we don’t do that.”

An interesting in-between case is presented by the term *teacher-proof* (meaning an approach or set of materials which is impervious to the efforts of an individual teacher to change it). This seems to be a quality highly desired by textbook publishers and ELT managers, but is despised by those, especially in teacher development, who see teacher reflection and on-the-spot decision making as essential to the success of language teaching.

2. Out-dated terms

This group brings together terms which connote a view of language or learning which is now considered old-fashioned or even out-dated. In using such terms, a teacher may welcome the connotation as a way of making a case for the rehabilitation of an unfashionable idea, or she may inadvertently reveal herself still to be thinking in the “old” ways. Whichever is the case, she would do well to understand the connotations of what she is saying.

The word *drill*, as mentioned earlier, is, for many, hopelessly redolent of Audio-Lingual Methodology, an approach thought to have been superceded several times over by more modern, more “effective” views of language learning. It was long ago replaced by the more general *exercise*, only to be superceded in more recent times by *task*. A *drill*, an *exercise* and a *task* may effectively be very similar, if not identical, activities, but each has very different connotations of out-datedness or modernity.

Similarly, *grammar teaching* has been treated as out-dated in many circles, whereas *consciousness raising* is perfectly acceptable. They may, in fact, be quite different things, as the distinction in terms implies, but at times they resemble each other closely and it is only the differing connotations of the terms which keep them apart.

A clear-cut case of the same phenomenon being labelled and re-labelled as trends in our view of language learning come and go is provided by the influence of a learner’s first language on second-language performance (and vice versa). The term *interference*, which was for many years the norm, is now considered too negative and dismissive. For a while it was replaced by the more neutral *transfer*; but even that now seems to be giving way to *cross-linguistic influence*. The differences in connotation here can be particularly troublesome for the uninitiated.

The shift from referring to language skills as *active* or *passive*, to *productive* or *receptive* is in some ways similar. What has changed here, though, may not be so much our attitude to the language skills themselves as our attitude to the connotations of the words *active* and *passive*. Surely nobody ever thought that no effort was involved in the use of *passive* skills.

However, as our understanding of those skills has developed the negative connotations of passivity have come to be seen as less acceptable.

3. Unacceptable political implications

Whereas in group 2 what had become unfashionable about the terms was their connotation of a view of language and/or learning, in this group we have placed terms connoting a view of human relations which is no longer viewed as politically correct.

What are we to call those who study English? It seems to be more acceptable to define them as learning the language (*learners*) rather than studying it (*students*). Beyond the language classroom, the search for a politically acceptable term for them has been wide-ranging: *LEP* (limited English proficiency) students, *ESL learners*, *bilinguals*, *ENL* (English as a New Language) students. Each of these terms has connotations which are acceptable or unacceptable depending on the views of the audience one is addressing.

Do we see our learners as making *errors* that need *correction*, or do they need *feedback* on their *interlanguage*? What has changed here is not so much how we view the “error” as how we view the student and his relationship to the teacher. Similarly, are we to *train* our learners (like a dog, the connotation goes), or are we to help them to *develop*?

At times the desire to avoid potentially discriminatory connotations goes even further. The objection to the connotations of the term *dominant language*, for the stronger of a bilingual’s languages, can surely only be a philosophical dislike of any form of domination. The alternative term *primary language* also has connotations that believers in human equality may wish to avoid.

Attempts have been made recently to problematise a number of terms, based on political objections to them. The word *method* has been under attack as has the notion of a *native speaker*. There have also been objections to the use of the word *foreign* in the term EFL and in the name of the professional association IATEFL. Anybody who uses these terms now needs to be aware of the debate over their acceptability. For those who are aware of it, the debate itself has become a connotation of the use of these words.

4. Connotations which change with social context

Terms in this group have by far the most slippery and elusive connotations, but the problems they pose for the uninitiated are just as real. They are terms which have different connotations in different settings.

Even an apparently simple term like *ELT teacher* can have vastly different connotations. In some contexts, it implies prestige, scholarship, social respect and a decent income. In others it can mean being looked down upon, even pitied, an inadequate income and a place near the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Bilingualism is something to which many teachers in Japan and indeed Russia aspire for both their students and their children. Yet, in many parts of the US, it is considered something of a social problem which the educational authorities need to address. The connotations of *bilingual education* in these differing contexts are thus very different.

Concluding remarks

The grouping of connotations of ELT terms offered here is, of course, an artificial creation. The examples could have been organized in other ways. However, we hope that it will be useful for those who work in teacher development. We hope that they will be able to use it to alert teachers not only to specific examples of connotations they need to be aware of in their professional communications, but also to the origins of some of these connotations so that as the language of our discourse evolves and changes, they may be sensitive to the kind of changes that are likely to lead to unpredictable connotations. To this end, we suggest that teacher development activities should regularly include exercises designed to raise teachers' consciousness of the connotations of ELT terms, and draw attention to examples as they arise.

The language of our professional discourse is supposed to facilitate communication between ELT professionals. With a little care for the connotations of the terms we use, it can do just that.

References

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