

"Political Correctness" in ELT Terminology.

Galina Lovtseich

*Far Eastern National
University, Vladivostok,
Russia*

Stephen M. Ryan

*Eichi (Sapientia) University,
Hyogo, Japan*

Reference Data:

Lovtseich, G., & Ryan, S.
(2005). "Political Correctness"
in ELT Terminology. In K.
Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi,
& M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2004
Conference Proceedings*.
Tokyo: JALT.

This paper is part of an on-going project which is looking at terms used by ELT professionals which can be problematic for the uninitiated. The focus here is on a particular sub-set of problematic terms, those which carry connotations (of which the naïve user might be unaware) because of the influence of "political correctness." A variety of examples of such terms is offered, within the framework of a tentative typology, along with suggestions for acquainting new users with the terms and the kinds of problems they are likely to cause.

This report is part of a wider, ongoing investigation of terms used by ELT professionals which can be problematic for those unfamiliar with the language we use in our professional discourse. Changes in technology and geo-politics afford more and more possibilities for English teachers to interact with each other both locally and across national boundaries, whether it is the real-world context of conferences and seminars or its virtual equivalent in journals, chat-rooms and email correspondence. Although we all share a common language, English, the language that we teach, our professional discourse is often hindered by the frequent use of technical terms which are opaque and sometimes incomprehensible to the uninitiated.

Whilst some of these terms (***CALL**, communicative competence*) can be neatly demonstrated or defined during teacher training or re-training, there are others which carry hidden cultural baggage in their connotations, making them less tractable to neat explanation or even to ready understanding except by those already immersed in the professional discourse of language teachers. The "culture" involved here is often that of the pedagogical traditions and local contexts which have contributed most heavily to the development of mainstream ELT: those of the U.S., the U.K. and, to a certain extent, Australia. This makes the terms particularly problematic both for new teachers and for teachers coming from outside the context of those countries.

The particular focus of this report is on a sub-set of problematic terms, whose connotations are influenced by what may be called "political correctness." Here "political" should be taken to include both the broad sense of ideologies competing for dominance in the way people view the world, and in the more local sense of ELT ideologies ("approaches") competing for dominance in the way teachers view their teachers. At any given time, some ideologies are clearly "in" (generally accepted, to the exclusion of all others), others are just as clearly "out" (labeled "politically

incorrect" and shunned in polite discourse), and still others are in transition, often as a result of concerted attempts by ideological partisans to promote or denigrate them.

A teacher who enthuses about the great success of a new *drill* she has just tried out in the classroom is using a term redolent of out-dated thinking about language teaching. If she does so knowingly and willingly (maybe even provocatively), all is well. However, if she does so unwittingly, unaware of the connotations of the term she has chosen, she may unintentionally identify herself with reactionary forces within language teaching or simply reveal herself and her teaching to be hopelessly out of date.

On of the things that we have discovered in our investigation of politically loaded terms is that very often the language teachers use has evolved more rapidly and more decisively than the ways in which they teach. The same teacher, after the *same* lesson would have produced a quite different impression had she referred to her success with a new *task* or *activity*. In other words, while there can at times be little difference between a *drill* and a *task*, there is a great deal of difference in the way we view a teacher who uses these different words.

The matter is further complicated by the fact that the ELT discourse community is far from monolithic in its ideological beliefs. On the level of terms this manifests itself both in attempts by some groups of teachers to problematise certain terms in order to draw attention to their ideological loading, as a number of critical pedagogues have done with the term *native speaker* in recent years (see for example Penycook, 1994); and in the adoption by rival ideological camps of different sets of synonymies and antonymies, so

that Krashen may well view *noticing and grammar teaching* as synonyms and ascribe negative connotations to both (as he did in his JALT2004 plenary address), whereas Long would undoubtedly disagree and use *noticing* with positive connotations (see for example Long, 1983).

To help to guide teachers through this potential minefield of unwanted outdated and no-longer-acceptable connotations, we propose a typology of ELT terms influenced by "political correctness" and a number of suggestions for using the typology to raise awareness of the problem and its likely manifestations among those new to the professional discourse of language teachers.

The Typology

For over two years now, we have been collecting ELT terms which have potential problems for the new user, by searching through journals and newsletters, and listening attentively to conference presentations and even teachers' room gossip. When we came to analyse those terms which appeared to be subject to political correction, we found (1) that they tended to occur in clusters, and (2) that most of those clusters could be usefully grouped into four or five categories. Thus, the typology offered here is not the result of the imposition of pre-existing categories, but arose from the data before us.

The "clusters" mentioned above are the result of one term falling into disfavour and being replaced by another, more acceptable one. In some cases, this process has been repeated several times, buffeted by a series of changes in ideological nuance. So, in the example already cited: *drill* has changed into *exercise*, then to *activity* and now to *task*, leaving behind four terms which can be synonymous in their

denotation, but each with its own nuanced connotation of mustiness or modernity.

These clusters can be arranged into categories reflecting the nature of the ideological changes which have motivated them. The categories are not intended to be hermetically sealed from each other: it is in the nature of language that there is always overlap and the possibility of re-categorising a term. However we have found them to be useful in talking about, and teaching about, the terms. The categories include: (1) terms affected by the rejection of old language teaching methods and the acceptance of new ones; (2) terms affected by a change in the way we commonly view the learning/teaching process; (3) terms affected by a change in the way we commonly think about our learners; and (4) terms affected by changes in the way teachers think the world is and should be viewed.

For each category, example clusters of terms are given, with comments explanations where necessary:

Group 1: Out-dated (and new, improved) Methodologies

Drill – exercise – activity – task. The move away from audiolingualism to more real-world-like classroom activity has produced a change in vocabulary. It is not our view that all tasks are drills under a new name, but that there are generic similarities between the drills of the 1960s and 70s and the tasks of the 1990s and 2000s which are not apparent from the radical name-change.

Habit – strategy. This change also results from the rejection of behaviourism and audiolinguslism (by the language teaching mainstream) combined with a continuing need to

conceptualises what changes language teachers seek to make in the behaviour of their students.

Grammar teaching – language awareness – consciousness raising – noticing. Is grammar teaching in or out? It never seems to be out for very long (for a very good reason), but persistently reappears under a new name, to protect the ideological purity of the grammar teacher.

Communicative. For over twenty years, this has been the password to all that is modern and forward-looking in ELT. No textbook sells well without this word somewhere on its cover; few teachers will admit to doing any classroom activity that is not, in some sense, communicative.

Authentic. ELT philosophers may disagree about the desired denotation of this word, but its connotations are second only to those of **communicative** for those wishing to show that they are in touch with modern ELT practice.

Group 2: Changed Views of Learning/Teaching

Teaching – learning. The most fundamental change has been in the way we refer to what happens in the classroom.

Language Teaching Conferences have become **Conferences on Language Teaching and Learning**. We have come to see a *teacher-centred* approach as outdated and in some sense imperialist, and the focus of our terminology has moved to *learner-centred* and *learning-centred* approaches.

Mistake – interlanguage. We no longer speak of our students' slips as mistakes, or even errors, but as a reflection of the current state of their interlanguage.

Error correction – feedback. As a result, we no longer correct their "errors" but offer feedback on their

communicative performance. As with "*drill – task*" the change in terminology is often much bigger than the change in ELT practice it is meant to reflect.

Interference – transfer – cross-linguistic influence. The contact between two languages inside the head of one person produces effects on both languages. The older term for this, *interference*, has come to be seen as impossibly negative in its connotations. Its replacement, *transfer*, has in its turn been found wanting in ideological rigour and recently scholars seem to prefer the more studiously neutral *cross-linguistic influence*.

Acquisition – development. What is to be the goal of language teaching / learning? Is it the acquisition of the target language? For many years, that is how we spoke of it, but more recently this is viewed as unhelpful: language proficiency is to be seen as something that grows and develops throughout a learner's life-time., not something that is acquired once and for all.

Method. There is now something outdated about the idea of using a particular language teaching method, or even an approach. Thanks, in large part to the efforts of Jack Richards, we are now in the Post-Method Era, in which teachers approach teaching eclectically, planning lessons based on their language teaching / learning philosophy and their understanding of the students' context, rather than on an adherence to a method. Again, how substantial the change has been in practice is difficult to judge, but *method* has certainly acquired backward-looking connotations.

Technique. This word has felt slightly uncomfortable to language teachers for many years now, with its implication that we are technicians working on a machine, rather than facilitators of an organic process. Interestingly, no real replacement has appeared for it, and we are compelled to use it from time to time, despite the unease some of us feel.

Group 3: Changed Views of the Learner

Student – learner. Rather like the change from teaching to learning, the way in which we talk about the recipients of teaching has evolved. Whereas *students* were one half of an essential student-teacher dyad, *learners* are engaged in a life-long process, at certain periods of which they may work with teachers to achieve their learning goals.

Training – development. Are we to train students/learners in how to use a language, or are we to help them to develop the ability to use it? Similarly, are teachers to be trained in how to teach, or to be helped to develop as teachers (and possibly as human beings as well)? *Training*, with its implications of a top-down process and its view of the recipient as being of lower status, is on the wane.

LEP – ENL. A further, related change in the view of the learner is apparent here. Do we see the learner as being lacking in something, as being of Limited English Proficiency, or as learning something new, as a student of English as a New Language? The former view has been labeled disparagingly as a "deficit hypothesis" by its critics. These two terms may not be familiar to language teachers in the Asian region, but are frequently used by educational administrators in the U.S. as they seek to classify the needs of students.

Group 4: Competing Worldviews

This category brings together terms which have changed, or which various groups have attempted to change, not because of changes in ideology within language teaching, but because of their connection to a wider ideological debate about how the world should be and how people should treat each other. It is this group that comes closest to the general usage of the term "political correctness."

Foreign language – language of wider communication

- **world language.** Objections have been raised to the very notion of "foreign-ness," notably by Simon Grennall, during his tenure as president of the International Association of Teachers of English as a *Foreign Language*. Its connotations of alien-ness and implication that not only is the language foreign to the learner but the learner is also foreign to the community of users of the language are unacceptable to those who see this as an infringement of the rights of the global citizen (similar objections have been made to the word "other" in TESOL). *Language of wider communication* was tried and rejected by some for its implication of hierarchy, that somehow *narrower* might be better than *wider*, or at least more normal.

ESL – EAL. Similarly, *second* has been under attack for its implication of "not as good as first" motivating careful users to replace *English as a Second Language* with *English as an Additional Language*, and to ask if the term *second language learner* is not somehow derogatory.

Native speaker – expert user. There has been a concerted attempt in recent years to problematise the use of *native speaker* (Pennycook, 1994). There can be no objection to the term if we are comfortable with the idea that an accident of

birth gives certain people both superiority in their knowledge of a language and the right to establish norms and rules for the use of the language. These ideas, however, are rejected as a matter of principle by some ELT practitioners and thinkers, and they have chosen to draw attention to what they see as an unacceptable worldview by drawing attention to the inequity of *native speaker* as a term, proposing *expert user* as a more egalitarian substitute.

Unclassified

One cluster of terms is particular interesting, although it does not fit into the four categories we propose.

Active/passive – productive/receptive – expressive/interpretive. Although these adjectives are used to refer to language skills, objections to their connotations in general (non-technical) English have led to moves to find more acceptable substitutes when they are used as ELT terms. The objection to viewing certain skills as *active* and others as *passive* has been that a reader or listener is far from passive, with a strong implication that passive is not a good thing for anybody to be. *Productive-receptive* is perhaps closer to representing the idea that any use of language requires effort, but there is still an implication that the receptive skills are somehow inferior (just as we do not like to see our learners as recipients of knowledge which we bring). To be passive or receptive is less valued than being active and productive in modern societies, hence the latest variant, *expressive/interpretive*, which attempts to use terms with similar connotations.

Using the Typology

Our intention is that the typology should be used during teacher training / development workshops, seminars and courses, for new teachers, or for those who are new to the international discourse of ELT. Obviously, it can be used to warn teachers about hidden negative connotations of terms they might otherwise use unwittingly. By extension, though, it can also be used to chart shifts in what is considered politically correct within our professional discourse. Ideally, it will be used to sensitise teachers to the kind of terms which are likely to be affected by changes in ideological views of ELT so that they will be better prepared to detect changes in the acceptability of terms in the future.

Conclusion

Language teachers, it can be argued, have a greater than average sensitivity to language and its uses. This is perhaps why our lexicon of acceptable terms is so sensitive to changes in ideology and worldview. This same sensitivity is needed in order to stay abreast of the nuances of political correctness which influence the use of language.

Our goal here is not to take sides in the political / ideological debates we describe, but to explore ways to alert language teachers to their effects in the language we use when we talk to each other. We hope that our typology will be useful to those who share our desire to raise awareness of and sensitivity to issues of political correctness in our professional vocabulary.

References

- Krashen, S. (2004, November). Why support a delayed-gratification approach to language education? Plenary address at JALT2004 conference, Nara, Japan
- Long, M. (1983). Does second language instruction make a difference? A review of the research. *TESOL Quarterly* 17, 3, 573-482.
- Pennycook, A. (1994) *The cultural politics of English as an International Language*. London: Longman.