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The postmodern language teacher: The future of task-based teaching

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Abstract

EFL teachers are living in a time of rapid social change. This inevitably affects the nature of a profession that both reflects society and helps to shape it. Hierarchical ways of thinking inherited from the students' past, along with socio-political preconceptions and metanarratives inherent in the target language are no longer seen as appropriate by new generations of language learners in Asia and in Korea in particular. This paper considers the implications of this situation and reviews postmodern trends in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) theory and practice, suggesting ways in which Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) might make foreign language acquisition a personally relevant, socially meaningful, and culturally acceptable process.

Introduction

Whatever perspective one might take in regard to contemporary art, literature, architecture, medicine, science, economics, politics and education, there can be little disagreement about the accelerating rate of change that is a daily fact of life in the 21st century. As Hawkes observes "we are living in a time of rapid social change. … such change will inevitably affect the nature of those disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it. … Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem to fit the reality

experienced by a new generation" (Hawkes, general editor's preface, in Hutcheon, 1989, p. vii). Hawkes refers indirectly in this quote to the educational implications of this situation, but Rogers (writing twenty years earlier) is more explicit, when he points out that

> We live in an environment that is continually changing. It seems that rapid change is our only constant. We are faced with an entirely new situation in which the goal of education, if we are to survive, is the facilitation of change and learning. … The only person who is educated is the person who has learned how to learn; the person who has learned how to adapt and change; the person who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security." (Rogers, 1969, pp. 151-152).

Expanding this theme, Edwards & Usher (1994) take the view "that education is itself going through profound change in terms of purposes, content and methods" and see a postmodern perspective as a means of understanding "the extent to which it [education] is both a symptom of and a contributor to the socio-cultural condition of postmodernity" (Edwards & Usher, 1994, p. 3). These authors identify many postmodern features in current educational practices, and aim, by providing a postmodern perspective on these, to promote "a way of looking at education differently" (1994, p. 1). In similar manner, this paper aims to identify postmodern features of contemporary TEFL theory and practice, so that they might be understood and validated in terms of their relation to the postmodern societies in which they are employed.

In the apparent absence of journal articles and books on the subject of postmodernism and TEFL, it has not been possible to perform a review of literature, though there are professional texts (e.g. Pennycook, 1998) that could be described as postmodern. In addition to this, it was noticeable when performing a literature search, that the isolated usages of the word "postmodernism" that did appear (e.g. Mockler, 2004, p. 2) assumed that the reader was well-informed on the topic of postmodernism and its implications for TEFL, despite the fact that a debate on this topic has apparently not taken place. This paper therefore spends some time examining postmodernism *per se*, before discussing its implications for the TEFL profession

Changing definitions

In contrast to its 'modern'[1] precursor (and in what might be seen as a characteristically self-referential manner), postmodernism appears not only to defy definition, but to include this ambiguity as part of its makeup (though when one considers that 'definition' is itself a concept based on Enlightenment ideals of logic and reason, this might not seem so surprising). Hence, O'Farrell complains that proponents of postmodernism rarely agree over what the term 'postmodern' actually means: "Indeed, many would argue that this very lack of agreement is in itself one of the distinguishing features of the 'postmodern'" (O'Farrell, 1999, p. 11). Hutcheon confirms that "Postmodernism is a phenomenon whose mode is resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political" (1989, p. 1), and Ward (2003) goes even further down this road, embracing this "sense of fluidity and open-endedness" which "resists being conveniently summarized in easy 'soundbites' and refuses to lend itself to any single cut and dried definition" (Ward, 2003, p. 1).

The extreme flexibility of postmodernism is not, however, a reason (or an excuse) for refusing to attempt to identify its characteristics (though once more, the evading of definite statements can also been seen as a characteristic of postmodernism). In this light, Hutcheon perseveres with her attempt to say what postmodernism is and is not:

> Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to say that the postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism), are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees. (Hutcheon, 1989, pp. 1-2)

[1] Hutcheon (1989, p. 1) notes that a "distinctive" feature of the postmodern is its "wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity" and "It is rather like saying something while at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said." Because of this, single quotes are used in this paper to indicate this possible doubleness of interpretation and meaning.

Following this vein of thought, Ward (2003) suggests that postmodernism can be seen (among other things) as: i) an actual *state of affairs* in society; and ii) the *set of ideas* which tries to define or explain this state of affairs (2003, p. 5). From this point of view, postmodernism is a set of concepts and debates about what it means to live in our present times. These debates have a number of common themes:

1. They propose that society, culture and lifestyle are today significantly different from what they were 100, 50 or even 30 years ago.
2. They are concerned with concrete subjects like the developments in mass media, the consumer society and information technology.
3. They suggest that these kinds of development have an impact on our understanding of more abstract matters, like meaning, identity and even reality.
4. They claim that old styles of analysis are no longer useful, and that new approaches and new vocabularies need to be created in order to understand the present. (Ward, 2003, p. 6)

Although postmodernism has been slow to affect the field of education, postmodern concepts have been adopted and adapted by many disciplines (Hutcheon focuses on architecture, literature, photography, films and feminism, though Ward ranges from philosophy to cultural studies, geography and history), and "there are really several postmodernisms in existence, or at least many variations" (Ward, p. 5). Because of this, meanings and definitions tend to be ungeneralizable. However, a number of broad approaches can be identified, and these will be used later in the paper to discuss contemporary TEFL theory and practice. These categories include:

1. Crossing of borders (breaking down of barriers)
2. De-colonization (diversification and regionalism)
3. Decentralization (lateral, rather than hierarchical decision-making)
4. Deconstruction (questioning traditional assumptions about certainty, identity, and

truth)

5. Eclecticism (the borrowing and mixing of features from different systems and fields)
6. Pastiche (imitating the previous works of others, often with satirical intent)
7. Relativism (conceptions of time, space, truth and moral values are not absolute but are relative to the persons or groups holding them)
8. Self-contradiction (duplicity; the conscious making of self-undermining statements)
9. Self-reference and self-reflexiveness (use of meta-language and self-constructing forms)

Changing sciences

The four themes and nine categories mentioned in the preceding section were commented upon by Lyotard (1984), who identified various 'metanarratives' of the 'modern' Age of Reason, which he said, had been replaced by a whole range of competing 'small stories' (decentralization). These metanarratives, which influenced all Western thought, included i) progress; ii) optimism; iii) rationality; iv) the search for *absolute knowledge* in science, technology, society and politics; and v) the idea that gaining knowledge of the *true self* was the only foundation for all other knowledge (Ward, 2003, p. 9). Science (which replaced religion in the 'modern' era in terms of being the subject of unquestioning faith) was seen from this standpoint as: i) progressive (moving towards a state of 'complete knowledge'); ii) unified (all sub-disciplines shared the same goal); iii) universal (aiming at total truths which would benefit all of human life); and iv) self-justifying (since it was obviously intent on the betterment of the 'human race').

Such apparently "common sense" notions (the common sense of Newtonian Mechanics and the Industrial Revolution) received a number of telling theoretical setbacks in the 20th century, when Einstein developed a physics of relativity (Hofstadter. 1999, p. 100), Gödel showed that every mathematical and scientific system was incomplete and contained its own contradictions: "provability is a weaker notion than truth, no matter what axiomatic system is involved" (Hofstadter. 1999, p. 19), and Heisenberg proposed his "uncertainty principle"

along with quantum mechanics (Hofstadter, 1985, p. 455). These theorems were particularly stunning blows to the modernist ideal, since they not only questioned the concepts of 'absolute knowledge' and 'absolute truth,' to which the Enlightenment project aspired, but they completely refuted even the possibility of their existence.[2] It might seem ironic that the icon of reliability and security (objective science) in a definable and controllable world of Newtonian cause-and-effect should give rise to sub-sciences (chaos theory, etc.) which call into question the guiding metanarratives behind all previous scientific enquiry. However, this in itself is an example of the postmodern "self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement" (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 1) alluded to in the previous section. Finally, the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, added further nails to the 'rational thought' coffin in the second half of the 20th century, when he set out to show that there is no system, no theory, no science or political system which rests on entirely rational foundations.

These were theoretical warnings about the demise of the *modern project*, and the onset of a relativistic postmodernism, but the warnings soon received reinforcement, when the myth of benign, philanthropic scientific enquiry was found to be practically inadequate, or even inaccurate. This collapse of faith can be traced to a number of reasons:

1. the contribution of science to ecological disasters (e.g. pollution, greenhouse gases, acid rain) and mass killing (nuclear, chemical and biological weapons);
2. the commercialization of science (e.g. the withholding of permission by pharmaceutical corporations in the US to make cheaper, generic versions of their life-saving drugs in underdeveloped countries - an issue recently addressed by the WTO Doha declaration [World Trade Organisation, 2001]);
3. the loss of faith in the ability to measure reality (due to findings in the sciences of complexity, 'chaos theory', quantum mechanics, etc.); and
4. the division of science into a mass of specialisms (a multitude of disciplines and sub-disciplines now follow their own agendas and speak their own languages).

[2] Hofstadter (1999) gives an extremely readable account of these (and other) scientific events.

'The masses' have thus become skeptical about the notion of a unified, 'objective' science, searching for *the answer to life* (aptly satirized by Adams, 1995), and although politicians studiously ignore acid rain, chemical waste landfills, and global warming, or try to defend 'the bomb,' napalm, anthrax (developed first in the UK), 'collateral damage' and even 'friendly fire,' the cold reality of not-so-'smart' technology has left their voters doubting the link between impersonal, unaccountable, commercialized sciences and 'progress' (cf. Kuhn, 1960). As O'Farrell asks:

> Was a devastated natural environment the only outcome of the scientific search to improve our physical living conditions? Clearly there was something very wrong indeed with the whole idea that unaided Reason and rationality could save us. (O'Farrell, 1999, p. 14)

This demise of the sanctity of experimental science led Lyotard to define postmodernism as an attitude of 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984, p. 105), and inspired others to rephrase this in terms of the 'deaths' or 'ends' of previously overwhelming social givens. These deaths included: i) the end of history – skepticism about the idea of progress, and the way in which histories are written (cf. the Japanese rewriting of the Second World War in school textbooks); ii) the end of 'man' - 'mankind' was now seen as a social and historical invention; and iii) the death of the real – reality had become increasingly constructed by *signs*: "the image bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 170). These 'deaths,' and the consequent postmodern preoccupation with exhaustion, pessimism, irrationality and disillusionment, form an important part of postmodernism, expressing the confusion of a world which has lost its faith in 'modern' principles and metanarratives.

Changing worlds

The meaninglessness inherent in the loss of scientific truth and financial independence did

not cause scientists to give up their professions, however. In contrast, new branches of science appeared (e.g. chaos theory, complexity theory, game theory, model theory and systems theory) and the applied technology that resulted from them quickly produced enhanced communication across national borders, facilitating the spread of mass media, satellite communications, computer networks, the internet, and the 'global village.' Such unconstrained interaction between members of different nations, cultures, and hierarchies quickly enabled (or highlighted) social upheavals as evidenced in:

- an erosion of conventional distinctions between high and low culture;
- fascination with how our lives seem increasingly dominated by visual media;
- a questioning of ideas about meaning and communication, and about how signs refer to the world; and
- a sense that definitions of human identity are changing, or ought to change. (Ward, 2003, p. 11).

In addition to these perceptual changes, the unimpeded crossing of previously well-defined and monitored borders led to a reappraisal of physical and political geography, with Soja (1989) arguing that the primary characteristic of postmodernism is its replacement of historical with spatial concepts. He also identified the 'non-spaces' (airports, motorway resting places, shopping malls, the internet, chatrooms, etc.) of postmodernism. These tend to be independent of their geographical (national) location, feature a mix of universal and regional influences (global music, fashion, technology, etc., alongside local products and variants), and highlight a postmodern tension between sameness and difference (cf. Deleuze, 1994). Such new geographies create new, symbolic boundaries of regional languages and cultures. In view of these upheavals and border-crossings, it could be said that postmodernism (in addition to rejecting the logical/rational foundation stones of the Enlightenment), chips away at the three main cornerstones of modern politics: i) nation; ii) class; and iii) belief in the wholesale transformation of the world (Ward, 2003, p. 173).

Before concluding this section, it is significant to note that both Ward (above) and

Hutcheon (quoted earlier) speak of the attempt by postmodernism to "'de-doxify'[3] our cultural representations and their undeniable political import" (1989, p. 3). This de-politicisation has important implications for TEFL, which has historically been inextricably linked to the 'modern' metanarrative of colonialism. It was no coincidence that Europe set out to colonize the world during the 'modern' period, since, in its pursuit for absolute (rational) perfection, it 'naturally' assumed that it was far in advance of other countries in this venture, and that its task (and right) was to 'improve' and colonize them. Early colonists were supported in this trade-sponsored endeavor by their evangelistic religion, which told them that it was their responsibility to be 'fishers of men,' and to save 'barbarians' from certain death in Hell. The success of European colonization of the 'four corners' of the globe, and in particular the scope and breadth of the British Empire (on which the sun never set) meant that Western religions, mores and cultural norms were disseminated throughout the 'civilized' world, and the products and raw materials of colonized countries were sent back to the 'developed' West, to fuel the continuing search for ultimate truth. The parallel process of linguistic colonization which accompanied this 'civilization' has been well documented by authors such as Phillipson (1992), Pennycook (1998) and Canagorajah (1999), while the postcolonial rejection of 'linguistic imperialism' has found expression through the current interest in World Englishes (cf. Kachru & Nelson, 2001).

Changing educations

Mass education was also part of the 'modern' plan for the betterment of mankind, and set out to deliver progress, development and security, through an educated workforce. However, as O'Farrell irreverently observes:

> A schooling system which promised social equality and enlightenment for all has done little more than reinforce social division and entrench new forms of conformity,

[3] 'Doxa' – what Roland Barthes called public opinion or the 'Voice of Nature' and consensus (Barthes, 1977:47)

> ignorance and exclusion. Was this the happiness and social harmony promised by the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and nineteenth century economist Karl Marx? (O'Farrell, 1999, p. 13)

Education has been notable for its resistance to postmodern ideas, though this is not surprising, when one considers that schools and universities have traditionally been prime movers in the promotion of Enlightenment ideals. As Peters points out, "The project of liberal mass schooling and higher education in the late twentieth century is built around the intellectual authority inherited from the Enlightenment" (Peters, 1995, p. xxx). In addition, "postmodernism's emphasis on the inscribed subject, the decentred subject constructed by language, discourses, desire and the unconscious, seems to contradict the very purpose of education and the basis of educational activity" (Edwards & Usher, 1994, p. 2). The role and nature of education has further been complicated by its social purpose – that of helping individuals to become fit for society (cf. the concept of 'Hongik-Ingan' ["Contributing to the overall benefit of humankind" - Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 2005, p. 5] which is at the heart of education policy in Korea) – since this has involved the imposition and acceptance of "well-regulated liberty" (Donald, 1992, p. 12), with the pedagogues (who 'know' what the students 'need') exerting their authority 'in the best interests' of the students: "The strict application of nurturing and protective attitudes toward children has created a paradoxical situation in which protection has come to mean excluding the young from meaningful involvement in their own communities" (Postman, 1995, p. 102). This is the paradox of a system which attempts to prepare individuals for a democratic society and does so through the autocratic, teacher-centered, compulsory classroom, thus denying opportunities to act democratically (though postmodern political commentators might suggest that this is a valid re-presentation of a society in which voters are increasingly disillusioned, mis/uninformed, and distanced from their ability to influence politicians – cf. Chomsky, 2005).

Whatever might happen inside the classroom, however, an unmistakable postmodern aspect of contemporary education (as with science) is its commercialization. Hutcheon situates the postmodern "squarely within both economic capitalism and cultural humanism –

two of the major dominants of much of the western world" (1989, p.13), and education in the postmodern world has accordingly been made accountable to capitalist market forces. In terms of requiring state education to 'come up with the goods' by showing a measurable result in return for the money invested, this debate has been termed "the discourse of instrumentalism" (Mockler, 2004, p. 3), and was well demonstrated by U.S. president G. W. Bush in the 2000 pre-election debate: "You must have mandatory testing. You must say that if you receive money, you must show us whether or not children are learning to read and write and add and subtract. … Testing is the cornerstone of reform" (*New York Times*, 2000, cited in Mockler, 2004, p. 3). Consequently, the state, students, parents, schools and universities are no longer concerned with intrinsic knowledge, but rather with its empirical 'usefulness' in terms of getting a job, obtaining scholarships and grants, or holding on to state funding: "In short, knowledge is no longer assessed in terms of its truth or falsity or its promotion of justice, but in terms of its efficiency at making money" (Lyotard, 1984, p.51).

In the Korean context, the excessive attention paid to high-stakes testing (as advocated by president Bush), has produced a particular variant of this phenomenon. Rather than asking the extrinsic "Will this English lesson help me to learn English for use in the global village?", the reflexive "Will this English lesson help me learn how to learn English?", or even the intrinsic "Will this English lesson help me to maximize my love of language and show me the beauty inherent in language learning and cultural exchange *per se*?", high school students in Korea typically ask (and are supported by their parents in doing so) "Will this information be on the CSAT?"[4] If the answer is not "Yes," then there is (in their perception) no reason for acquiring the information, and students turn their attention to more obviously instrumental learning texts, such as the Educational Broadcasting Service (EBS) CSAT Preparation books, which form the unofficial syllabus of most 3rd-year high school English classes in Korea (cf. Finch, 2004a). This attitude is the fault of the system rather than the students, since the use of English as a vehicle of high-stakes testing (gatekeeping) has turned it into a means of achieving security and status (students with high English proficiency [or rather, high TOEIC[5]

[4] CSAT: College Scholastic Aptitude Test – the national test for university entrance.

[5] TOEIC: Test of English for International Communication

scores] are more likely to obtain desirable jobs in an increasingly competitive job market). English (and education in general) is thus a means of getting into a 'good' university and then getting a 'good' job, and educators have to date (rather than clamoring for sound systems of assessment) followed the dictates of governments and parents in teaching students how to be proficient in passing the high-stakes, multiple-choice, discrete-item, language-as-code CSAT (cf. Finch, 2004a).

A further example of the commercialization of education in Korea can be found in the proliferation of private language institutes. These institutes exist to help students pass the CSAT, TOEFL,[6] TOEIC, TEPS[7] and even high-school-entrance tests, though they also have a function of teaching conversational (and business-oriented) use-of-English to interested clients. In the words of Kim See-bong, the owner of such an institute, "Children from nursery school to high school go to five or six hakwons [private institutions] a week. Some take in as many as nine. When they come back home, they still have to prepare for the schoolwork" (Kim, 2005). Confirming this observation with a more official source, the Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI), has reported that "seven out of 10 students are receiving tutoring, with private education expenses taking up an average of 12.7 percent of the household expenditure" (Soh, 2004). The 'grand postmodern metanarrative' in this case is the urge to make money and obtain secure employment, whatever the sacrifice incurred in terms of 'Hongik-Ingan': "the making of adaptable, curious, open, questioning people has nothing to do with vocational training and everything to do with humanistic and scientific studies" (Postman, 1995, p. 32).

It is evident, therefore, that education in the postmodern era can no longer see itself as independent of historical, economic and cultural contexts, and that schools (especially the many private secondary schools in Korea) must instead attract 'clients' and money through persuasive images (simulacra) in brochures, prospectuses and websites. Just as people who buy a can of dog food in a supermarket "are really buying the image of happy television canines bounding through the fields towards their well groomed, well adjusted masters and

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[6] TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language

[7] TEPS: Test of English Performance Skills

mistresses" (O'Farrell, 1999, p. 14), educational media products encourage clients to purchase 'images' of tradition, academic status, high technology, etc., rather than the tiresome reality of endless, low-order-thinking (memory-based) test-preparation.

A recurring problem when paradigm shifts and revolutions occur is that 'the devil you know' might well be preferable to 'the one you don't know,' especially if reforms are not carried out with sufficient preparation and understanding of the factors involved. In this context, Edwards & Usher offer some suggestions for shaping an appropriate postmodern education system:

1. Education should be more diverse in terms of goals and processes and consequently in terms of organisational[8] structures, curricula, methods and participants.
2. Education should no longer function as a means of reproducing society or as an instrument in large-scale social engineering. It [should] become limitless both in time and space.
3. Any attempt to place education into a straitjacket of uniform provision, standardised [sic]curricula, technicised teaching methods, and bearer of universal 'messages' of rationality or morality would be difficult to impose.
4. Education in the postmodern, cannot help but construct itself in a form which would better enable greater participation in a diversity of ways by culturally diverse learners.
5. Education in the postmodern is likely to be marked both by a general decentring and a general loosening of boundaries. (Adapted from Edwards & Usher, 1994, pp. 211-212)

Postman, in a postmodern postscript to these suggestions, notes that "among the "new" ideas now current in several places is the organization of schooling around themes. This is a progressive idea, pointing as it does to the need for providing meaning in education" (Postman, 1995, p. 101). This 'theme-based' learning has been paralleled in the

[8] The spelling in citations in this paper reproduces that of the original versions.

project-based movement in English Language Teaching (ELT) (cf. Legutke & Thomas, 1991), and provides a suitable introduction to a discussion of postmodernism in TEFL – the purpose of this paper.

Changing Englishes

A postmodern approach to language learning challenges previously 'given' linguistic and cultural representations and their political import by showing that many concepts (metanarratives) normally taken for granted by teachers and implicit in their practices (e.g. capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism, teacher-direction and control, textbooks, standardized tests, experimental research, and even 'standard' pronunciation), are in fact cultural and man-made, with various 'hidden agendas' deriving from an Enlightenment Age view of reality. Seen from this perspective, the TEFL profession has been a means of (consciously or unconsciously) spreading cultural, economic and religious values (e.g. early evangelical English teaching in Korea), often under the implicit assumption of universal "correctness" described by Phillipson as "English linguistic hegemony" (1992, p. 73). The imposition of such external values can cause EFL students to quit the language class, and has led Bocock to advocate the "re-introduction of philosophical, rational discussion of values and politics into social theory and the social sciences" (1986, p. 123). Benson & Voller point to "a growing recognition of the political nature of language learning" (1997, p. 6) and note that terms such as "idealogy" and "empowerment" have entered the standard vocabulary of language education theory, mirroring the growing concern with the social implications of language learning and the culturally invasive nature of much language education (Phillipson 1992; Pennycook 1998).

Harrison warns that "teaching a language is not a value-free, or transparent, activity. What we do in the language classroom is affected by who we are, the views we hold, and the societies we are part of" (Harrison, 1990, p. 1), and Holly adds that English "can also act as a means of politico-cultural colonisation of the spirit, serving the interests of the most powerful concentrations of economic power the world has ever known" (Holly, 1990, p. 18). Phillipson

therefore calls for a "macro-societal theoretical perspective" (Phillipson, 1992, p. 2) of language pedagogy, and calls attention to Stern's comment that "Social scientists … have hardly recognized the importance of theories and descriptions of society and culture for language teaching" (Stern, 1983, p. 282).

The 'linguistic imperialism' debate highlights postmodern, postcolonial attempts to diversify English language learning, and to make it more decentralized and free of totalizing[9] cultural and intellectual agendas. This can be seen as one of the inter-linked strands of postmodern language teaching and learning, as itemized in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Contrasting modern and postmodern educational concepts

Modern metanarratives	**Postmodern metanarratives**
High-stakes, standardized testing (Absolute measurement; focus on the product of learning)	Classroom-Based Assessment using portfolios, journals, formative self- and peer-assessment (Relativistic focus on process; deconstruction of the standardized testing paradigm)
Competition (aggression, competitive individualization, survival of the fittest, first-past-the-post)	Collaboration (Social learning, teamwork) balanced by a new form of individualization – autonomous learning and self-access learning
Studying English through its 'highest achievements' i.e. elitist English literature (Strict boundaries; restrictions of genre)	Learning English through pop-culture, comics, the internet, etc. (Plurality of genres; crossing boundaries; eclecticism)
Linguistic imperialism (Colonialism) The English 'native-speaker'	Postcolonialism (Use of diverse Englishes as variants of a lingua franca, providing a means of expressing local cultures; death of the 'native speaker')
Structural syllabi (Totalization)	Process syllabi, task-based and project-based learning (Deconstruction of propositional language learning concepts)

[9] cf. Hutcheon, 1988, p. 62, for a discussion of this term

Quantitative, experimental, 'objective' research (Absolute measurement of rigorously isolated and independently observed 'truths')	Qualitative, subjective, action research (Relativistic description of perceptions; systems analysis of group learning environments)
Behaviorist view of learning as predictable and independent of emotions	Recognition of affective and social filters (language learning as social, cultural, emotional and unpredictable)
Standardized, Western English (Totalization)	Regional Englishes, dialects and pronunciations (Decentralization, Regionalization, Diversification)
Linear, sequential learning, language as code (Absolute, grammatical 'truths')	Self-reflexive use of meta-language and learning strategies in a non-linear learning format
Teacher-centered learning (Centralization)	Student-centered learning (Decentralization)
Teacher-controlled learning (Totalization)	Student autonomy, self-directed learning (Decentralization, regionalism)
Studying the culture of the target language (Centralization, colonialism)	Studying regional and global cultures through the target language (Regionalism and globalism).

It would take a sizeable book to discuss all these aspects of contemporary TEFL theory and practice (Table 1) from a postmodern perspective. However, it is noticeable that the educational theories and practices outlined in the right-hand column of Table 1 arose as a result of professional enquiry, and that the postmodernism perspective provides a means of bringing them all together under the pluralist umbrella(s) of border-crossing, deconstruction, decentralization, post-colonialism, regionalism, relativism and self-reflexiveness.

In fact, the multiplicity of factors and influences in TEFL is itself a manifestation of the postmodern sciences of systems theory and complexity. According to these, a system (such as a language learner) will interact with other systems at the same level, or at higher and lower levels (e.g. parents, classmates, friends, TV, computer games, internet sites, movies, and religion), and will develop and change through these complex, dynamic interactions, leading to the emergence of a unique collection of needs, intelligences, learning preferences, learning styles, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes, which are not simply the sum of their constituent parts (Finch, 2004b, p. 29). This scenario can be applied to hierarchies of systems, from the

learner (him/herself a collection of subsystems) to the learning environment, the teacher, the school, the education system, researchers, authors of academic texts, and the TEFL profession itself. Rather than attempting to outline the history of paradigm shifts and advances in TEFL methodology which have led to the current situation, it is appropriate to note that TEFL pedagogy has emerged in its current form as a result of the dynamic interactions between approaches, authors, teachers, researchers, students, learning communities, cultures, and innumerable other factors. All of the mutually-influencing concepts in Table 1 (student-centeredness, classroom-based assessment, learning strategies, etc.) are systems of theory and practice which have emerged from previous academic enquiry, and which continue to "bounce off" each other, producing new, collective or dissipated variants.

In terms of viewing current TEFL concepts as instances of a postmodern response to a postmodern world it is useful at this point to return to the first of Ward's four postmodern themes of the "Changing definitions" section and re-present it from a TEFL perspective: *i) the TEFL profession is significantly different from what it was 100, 50 or even 30 years ago.* The advent of the process syllabus, student autonomy, collaboration, alternative assessment, etc. have radically changed the face of a profession which not so long ago hoped to 'split the atom' of language learning through well-defined, behaviorist learning practices.

The second of Ward's themes can also be re-presented in like manner: *ii) TEFL is concerned with concrete subjects like the developments in mass media, the consumer society and information technology.* As already mentioned, these have had a significant effect on TEFL, with the marketization of language learning institutes through mass media, the use of media and information technology to provide individual language learning opportunities (self-access learning) and the use of TV, videos, the internet, etc. in the language classroom.

Ward's third postmodern theme is also highly relevant to TEFL, since it "suggests that these kinds of development have an impact on our understanding of more *abstract* matters, like meaning[10], identity and even reality" (Ward, 2003, p. 6). Meaning has become an important part of contemporary EFL learning theory, such that Williams & Burden (1997)

[10] These words have been underlined here for the sake of convenience.

define education as "helping people to make their own meaning." They also offer "Ten basic propositions" that they see as crucial for language teachers, the second and third of which state that "learners learn what is meaningful to them," and "learners learn in ways that are meaningful to them" (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 204). This is in stark contrast to the meaningless, discrete-item substitution drills of earlier approaches, and is based on the contemporary studies and SLA theories which suggest that a learner's language system develops "through communicating meaningfully in the target language … through the process of interacting, negotiating and conveying meanings in the language in purposeful situations" (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 16).

Identity has already been alluded to in relation to the 'hidden cultural agendas' of linguistic imperialisms and the 'regional Englishes' movement, while reality can relate to a number of topics. The unreal 'displacement' and 'decontextualization' of the EFL teacher is a particular characteristic of the profession, since 'native-speaking' teachers usually find themselves in the 'non-space' of a learning institute in a foreign country (in contrast to ESL teachers, who remain inside the target culture), teaching their mother tongue (and culture) to people who come from a different reality and possess a different world-view. A further postmodern aspect of this situation is, however, that it is rapidly changing, and that the World Englishes movement, in its promotion of diverse regional Englishes, is making the 'native speaking instructor of English' an outmoded entity (except for students wishing to study in the US, or the UK, etc.), soon to be replaced by highly qualified, bilingual, homegrown language instructors.

There is also an interpretation of EFL reality which concerns the beliefs and perceptions of the learners themselves. As Rogers notes, language-learning beliefs (whatever their basis in 'truth' or mythology) represent reality for the individual (Rogers, 1951) and independent teaching/learning agendas based upon such beliefs drive learning. In this case, it seems reasonable to address student/teacher beliefs themselves before attempting to direct learning.

Finally, Ward's fourth postmodern theme "claims that old styles of analysis are no longer useful, and that new approaches and new vocabularies need to be created in order to understand the present" (Ward, 2003, p. 6). Once more, this strikes various TEFL bells, and has been alluded to in terms of the tension between quantitative and qualitative research

methods (Table 1) and the assumptions behind them (Nunan, 1992, p. 4). However, if we expand this theme to include pedagogic approaches, then it becomes evident that the product/ process paradigm shift described by Breen (1987) occurred in response to the inadequacy of a pre-existing metanarrative (the propositional syllabus) and led to the emergence of the 'task' as a unit of analysis (rather than grammar, situation, topic, or lexis) and as "a central pedagogical tool for the language teacher as well as a basic unit for language syllabus design and research" (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 168):

> The learning task provides a framework for meaningful interaction to take place, using "purposeful" (or meaningful) situations which refine cognition, perception and affect (Breen & Candlin, 1980, p. 91)

The principles and development of task-based language teaching and learning (TBLT) have been well-documented (cf. Candlin & Murphy, 1987; Crookes & Gass, 1993; Ellis, 2003; Leaver & Willis, 2004), with Leaver & Willis claiming that TBLT satisfies US governmental accountability requirements: "It is a tribute to the efficacy of task-based instruction (TBI) that this method has become the one of choice in the best government programs. Since the 1980s, nearly all government institutions have used TBI in their foreign language programs" (2004, p. 47). Ellis also suggests that "tasks can be seen as tools for constructing collaborative acts" (2003, 178) and that they can cater for learning by providing opportunities for learners:

- to use new language structures and items through collaboration with others;
- to subsequently engage in more independent use of the structures they have internalized in relatively undemanding tasks;
- to finally use the structures in cognitively more complex tasks. (Ellis, 2003, p. 178)

Tasks thus combine (or encourage) many of the postmodern features of TEFL theory and practice: collaboration, autonomy, student-centeredness, and negotiation of meaning. Tasks involve the students in their learning, and in so doing, promote active decision-making, problem-solving, critical thinking, and responsibility of learning. Furthermore, they included

formative self-assessment in this new approach to learning, by requiring learners to set goals, assess their achievements, and reflect on their needs.

When this approach is extended by letting tasks grow into projects, a form of TEFL emerges which can be said both to be a result of, and to contribute to, effective and meaningful language education in the postmodern era. Rather than expecting everyone to acquire the same language at the same time and at the same rate, and then giving everyone the same test (totalization), a project approach recognizes the diversity of learning needs, learning styles, language proficiencies, beliefs, attitudes and levels that exist in the typical EFL multilevel class, and allows students to study what they want, in the manner that they want. By putting students 'in the driving seat' (decentralization), the project syllabus fosters active communication skills (cooperation, discussion, negotiation, etc.) as well as problem-identification, goal setting, self-assessment and reflection (Legutke & Thomas, 1991, p. 160). The role of the teacher in this new situation is to facilitate learning by being a language resource and providing guidance (linguistic, emotional, cognitive and social) where appropriate.

Issues of teacher-control and logistic practicality are often voiced against the project syllabus, since an attractive aspect (for teachers) of the totalitarian language-teaching paradigm is its teacher control and therefore its manageability. However, the fact that everyone listens to the teacher, or performs the same homework, does not mean that meaningful learning is occurring. In fact it often means the opposite:

> … we can neither claim that learning is caused by environmental stimuli (the behaviorist position) nor that it is genetically determined (the innatist position). Rather, learning is the result of complex (and contingent) interactions between individual and environment. (Van Lier, 1996, p. 170)

An unfortunate aspect of EFL teaching is indeed that it is very difficult to identify linguistic improvement, when students visit the classroom for 45 hours in a semester or three hours a week. The lack of measurable linguistic results is not an excuse, however, for continuing to pursue the unobtainable goal of teaching the entire target language to every

student (Korean students of English Education typically complain that they are 'poor learners' because they do not possess native-speaking fluency, even though they often know more lexis and grammar than most native-speakers) or even of expecting every student to follow external syllabi and curricula. Instead, "it is useful to regard the classroom as a complex adaptive system" (Van Lier, 1996, p. 38) in which "languages go through periods of chaos and order as do other living systems. Furthermore, their creative growth occurs at the border between these two" (Larsen-Freeman, 1997, p. 158). This borderline between "order" and "chaos" describes the capacity for learning that complex adaptive systems have when they are neither settled nor chaotic - a concept with various implications for the language classroom:

> The educational context, with the classroom at its center, is viewed as a complex system in which events do not occur in linear causal fashion, but in which a multitude of forces interact in complex, self-organizing ways, and create changes and patterns that are part predictable, part unpredictable. (Van Lier, 1996, p. 148)

In giving equal value to the self-reflexive and the historically grounded, "postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as to undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge" (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 2), so it is interesting to note that the project approach focuses on holistic learning (education of the whole person), and develops autonomous (intrapersonal) and group (interpersonal) responsibility, while promoting critical, informed problem-solving and accountability – goals that the propositional paradigm and the 'modern' education movement ostensibly aimed at but subverted through centralization and totalization.

Conclusion

Postmodern TEFL theory presents English as a lingua franca with regional variations – a global language in which there are no native speakers, no standard pronunciations or

grammars, and no target culture. Western-oriented practices (and politics) of language teaching are being reinterpreted in the light of indigenous learning needs and sociopolitical factors, and the mutually exclusive goals attainment (MEGA) ethic of classroom competition and high-stakes testing (Kohn, 1992) is being discredited by more effective and socially desirable collaborative studying models. 'Learning to learn' is being seen as a lifelong process, in which language is used as a means of learning language, and the mass media has successfully colonized the profession, bringing its global messages of financial accountability, consumerism, and the 'image' as reality.

In this situation, TEFL as a profession cannot make any modernist claims to be progressive, unified or universal in its approaches or practices, though it is a postmodern contradiction and 'doubleness' that various establishments and schools of thought (e.g. the "peace as a global language" movement) continue in this endeavor, and that postmodern approaches include both neo-liberal and neo-conservative views on education reform. Perching on this metaphoric border between order and chaos, and "to the extent to which any of us is clear about anything" (Postman, 1995, p. 87), the postmodern perspective does, however, hold out hope for the future as well as describing the disillusionment with the past. As O'Farrell concludes:

> If education can be a machine for social conformity, it can also be a machine for the investigation of new horizons and new possibilities. The proliferation of 'difference' and uncertainty in the postmodern world, far from being a problem, is a constant invitation to imagine the unimaginable. (O'Farrell, 199, p. 17)

The postmodern TEFL situation can be seen as heralding a number of deaths; i) the death of the 'native speaker'; ii) the death of structuralism; iii) the death of imperialism; and iv) the death of the 'teacher.' However, this paper thus suggests that by shifting responsibility for learning and assessment to the learner, by focusing on the acquisition of learning skills and social skills in a group context, and by offering the opportunity to learn in self-directed learning projects, TBLT, and project learning in particular, can provide a feasible approach to language learning in the 21st century "through an awareness of how we use language, how

language uses us, and what measures are available to clarify our knowledge of the world we make (Postman, p. 87).

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