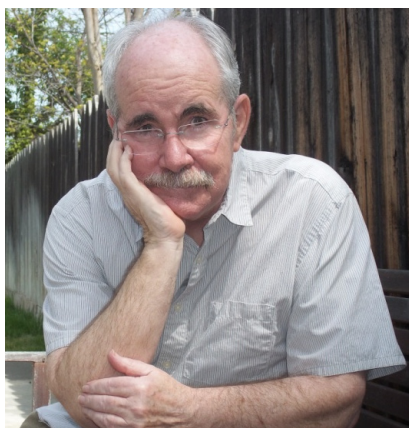


## Editorial on ESL/EFL<sup>i</sup>

### *English-as-a-Foreign Language*



**Professor Graham Thurgood:**  
*Language teaching research has suffered over the last four or five decades*

Successful language teaching is a central part of development, an important tool for business, and the major source of access to wider world knowledge. Even with this obvious importance and despite the considerable research that has been done, the feeling that it could be done better is widely shared.

Language teaching research has suffered over the last four or five decades from a misguided preoccupation with theories and methods at the expense of investigating actual classroom materials and techniques being used. The major finding is that what is taught in our methodology classes has little consequence for the teaching and learning taking place in the classrooms. Rather than being real, much of the theory seems to be a hypothetical construct with little direct connection to the classroom.

Nonetheless, we have learned three things that are relevant to our understanding of language teaching: First, individual abilities differ; all else being equal, learners with high language learning aptitudes learn better than those with low aptitudes. Aptitude, something that we have almost no control over, accounts for much of the difference between strong and weak learners. The second thing that we have only limited control of is that, comparing students with similar aptitudes, the research shows that the younger the student at the beginning of the language learning, the greater will be the student's level of success.

Recently, there has been a shift to classroom-based research, which, in practice, means a focus on classroom-management techniques and activities used by teachers. The engine that makes this classroom teaching successful is memory. To the degree that activities and techniques are consistent with how memory works, the techniques and activities are successful; to the degree that they are not consistent with how memory works, the

techniques are less successful. The more successful activities present language in ways that help with retention in memory. In general, we recognize that greater frequency of exposure to material results in better retention, particularly if it is distributed over time. Clarity is equally important. The greater the clarity of the conceptual, visual, or auditory image, the clearer the ideas are, the more the related language is retained. Time spent preparing visual aids, working out how to present material, and thinking about how to make things clearer is time well spent.

The conclusion is that, if we are interested in improving the teaching of languages, our focus should be on the techniques and materials used in the classroom. Notice it is not a focus on lesson plans, but more specifically on the structure of activities used to put the lesson plans into practice that needs to be emphasized.

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March, 2013

My academic life has followed two distinct areas of interest. So far, the English-as-a-Second-Language [ESL/EFL] interests have taken me to various places in the United States, Ethiopia, Poland, Thailand, and Malaysia, as well as the Peace Corps in Ethiopia (1968-1970). Included have been teaching undergraduate and graduate methods and methodology classes in the States and Malaysia, teacher training and countless EFL workshops in several countries over a 40-year period, publishing on EFL materials and production (for example, Leela Mohd. Ali and Thurgood 1991), co-authoring a column in the *New Straits Times* with Leela Mohd. Ali, and two EFL-focused Fulbrights in Malaysia, as well as directing an EFL programme in California.

My other major academic interest has been linguistics, with an emphasis on the establishment of historical relationships between Southeast Asian languages. This focus includes work on Sino-Tibetan (Thurgood and LaPolla, 2003; 2007), the Chamic languages (Austronesian) (Thurgood 1999), and various Li languages of Hainan.

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