English for Liberal Arts: Towards a New Paradigm for University Language Teaching

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The paper attempts to articulate a novel approach to English language teaching in which language reproduction itself is not the ultimate goal of instruction, but rather the ultimate transformation of the learner in the pursuit of understanding what it means to be human. This goal has long been a feature of liberal arts education, and the authors believe that it should not be limited to students in liberal arts colleges in the West but can form the basis for a dynamic approach to language teaching at the university level. The authors observe that East Asia is an attractive venue for challenging and enriching students with the values and educational goals of the liberal arts through the teaching of English as a foreign language, and

they illustrate some of the pedagogical implications of an English for Liberal Arts approach they advocate in several common course types and traditional skill areas.

　本研究は、言語を再現する事自体ではなく、人間である事の意味を理解しようとする中で、学習者を変革していく事を究極の目標とした新しい英語教育についての言及を試みたものである。この目標はリベラルアーツ教育にとって重要課題であり、欧米のリベラルアーツカレッジで学ぶ学生にのみ課せられるべきものではないと筆者は考える。東アジアの英語教育機関は、リベラルアーツの価値観と教育目標を確固たるものにするための又とない現場なのである。

I N 1854, at the dawn of the age of communication, Henry David Thoreau famously observed, "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate" (Thoreau, 1995, p. 67). Thoreau overstates his case, perhaps, but his sharp observation about the limits of "communication for communication's sake" still has some bearing upon theories of learning and paradigms of pedagogy. At least at the college level, language teachers are well aware of how the eyes of the best and brightest students begin to glaze over while doing yet another set of task-based exercises in a communicative language teaching (CLT) textbook.

The purpose of our colloquium and this brief paper is not to bury the communicative paradigm, but not to praise it overmuch either. As Thomas Kuhn observes in *Structures of Scientific Revolutions*, theories of knowledge—even scientific theories—tend to be belief systems rather than empirical truths (Kuhn, 1996). At present, the communicative paradigm functions as the Gospel of language teaching, and yet those of us who work with particularly curious, intelligent, and open-minded students, or who work within institutions such as liberal arts colleges that have articulated deeper and additional purposes for learning beyond communication, have all felt the limitations of the CLT paradigm. Therefore, our purpose here is to begin to explore and articulate a broader, more holistic, more intellectual, and

more inquiry-based framework for language learning, what we call "English for Liberal Arts" (ELA).The following will first elaborate key principles related to liberal arts and then trace their potential trajectory into several common areas of language teaching—reading, writing, listening, and testing—to see how these principles might re-form and re-formulate our approach to language teaching and language learning.

The Liberal Arts Model

To begin, it may be helpful to recall some of the historically identifiable theories of language teaching commonly referred to in TESOL training courses:

- The way of literature (classical, colonial, and 19th century)
- Grammar-translation Method (GTM)
- Audio-lingual Method (ALM)
- Content-based Language Teaching (CBLT)
- English for Academic Purposes (EAP)
- English for Special Purposes (ESP)
- The Communicative Paradigm (CLT)

This outline is simplified and some of these approaches overlap in time and focus; unfortunately, strict space limitations preclude us from describing them in detail within their historical-pedagogical contexts. Yet each involves assumptions, principles, and pedagogy that can be distinguished in the classroom. While certainly out of vogue in the West, the Grammar-Translation Method and its more recent incarnations (such as *Translation-Reading* or what Gorsuch (1998) refers to as *Yakudoku*) are still familiar to learners in the East Asian context. These more "traditionalist" or instrumental methods are often contrasted with the more learner-centered approaches such as CBLT and EAP / ESP, which place an emphasis on the actual content or task types utilized in language instruction; and CLT which, along with

the other learner-centered approaches, assumes that acquisition is enhanced through opportunities for students to engage in meaning-focused input and output. In all of these approaches there is a singular underlying assumption that whatever the method, or content used, the ultimate outcome of instruction is "acquiring language." With this goal in mind, the means to achieving it—that is, the actual content introduced—is of lesser importance. This is not to say that there is not an abundance of clever, engaging materials that teachers and students find interesting, simply that language acquisition, rather than the cultivation of critical thinking or character-building, for example, is the primary focus. While some may take issue with this characterization—for example those engaged in the Global Issues-focused CBLT approach—the testing and assessments of the students in a wide-range of such programs will bear out that it is indeed language acquisition which is of primary importance.

In contrast, an English for Liberal Arts approach revolves around distinctly different principles and assumptions, particularly a direct focus on the capacities for

- intellectual openness and curiosity.
- critical, creative, reflective, and independent thinking.
- problem-solving.
- continual learning through active involvement in one's own education.
- self-reflection.
- global citizenship and a multicultural perspective.

In other words, a liberal arts approach to language teaching uses language learning not merely for improving language skills for communication (CLT), or for preparing for future academic tasks (EAP), or for absorbing content (CBLT), but to engage students in the aims and aspirations of liberal arts. Just as Paulo Freire argues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that critical consciousness for first-language learners should not be postponed until

after literacy is achieved but rather integrated with language learning, we believe that our students are "already ready" for liberal learning, especially at the college level. Moreover, most university students in Asia have previously undergone years of language learning through CLT, ALM, and GTM approaches, but have seldom been consistently challenged as liberal learners.

Yet what, more precisely, does *liberal arts* mean? Perhaps the classic definition is from John Henry Newman's (2007) *The Idea of a University* first published in 1873: "To open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to know, and to digest, master, rule, and use its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, [and] critical exactness" (n.p.).

The best contemporary definitions of liberal arts come, unsurprisingly, from liberal arts colleges and universities. International Christian University (ICU), where several of this paper's authors teach, put it this way when establishing in 1953 the first liberal arts college in Japan: The "purpose of the liberal arts college" is to create citizens who will "acquire and use the skills and habits involved in critical thinking and will develop intellectual curiosity which challenges [them] constantly to seek new answers to new problems" (Bulletin of the International Christian University, 1953). More recently ICU has described its mission as developing "adventurous minds capable of critical thinking and sensitive to questions of meaning and value" (International Christian University Bulleting of the College of Liberal Arts, 2002).

These are fairly standard definitions, and quite similar to those from scores of liberal arts colleges in the United States, as well as more recently established colleges in Japan such as Waseda University SILS, Keio University's FSC (Fujisawa Campus), and Miyazaki International College (MIC).

Therefore, among the philosophical principles and teaching

assumptions of an English for Liberal Arts program are the following:

1. Recognize that students are curious, motivated, and already intelligent—they want to engage big issues and tackle significant problems.

2. Encourage writing, thinking, and research for discovery and exploration as part of the education of the whole person—not merely summarizing text and reproducing structure.

3. Emphasize the role of individual experience, including direct observation and thoughtful reflection, in analyzing problems, researching issues, and composing essays.

4. Teach forms but never formulas—a liberal education admits complexity and acknowledges that there is no one way to write an essay, a paragraph, or even a thesis statement.

The body of this paper illustrates how some of these principles can be integrated into language instruction; it begins with a rationale for implementing a liberal arts model in the East Asian context, and then proceeds to specific curricular examples of an English for Liberal Arts curriculum, from lectures, to writing assignments, to testing and assessment.

English for Liberal Arts in Practice

Asian Students, ELA, and Reading

As the introduction states, our students are "already intelligent" and want to grapple with serious issues through research and reflection. The liberal education model for decades has equipped Western heritage teachers to perform these tasks, and it would seem reasonable for us to pass on this tradition to our English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Yet somehow this paradigm has often been overlooked and neglected here in Asia.

While Western heritage teachers tend to recognize the transformational power of the liberal tradition as far as it applied to their own development, they seem to be overlooking the possibility that their (Asian) students may similarly benefit from such an approach. Accordingly, the "essential" task of integrating instruction to develop higher order thinking and communicative capacity is often "downplayed" by many language programs because it is "administratively more manageable" to separate the language skills (Grabe & Stoller, 2001, p. 76). Thus, for example in Thailand, it is still common to find that EFL classrooms teach reading skills in a discrete manner instead of seeking to present reading as an integrated activity which provides learners with the foundation to identify and articulate their views of the world.

As John Biggs, who has done influential work in this area, suggests, most Western heritage teachers never seriously examine their assumptions that all Asian classrooms "… are highly authoritarian; [use] teaching methods [that] are mostly expository, [and are] sharply focused on preparation for external examinations" (Biggs, 1996, p. 46). Many teachers may not attempt to teach Asian students using a liberal arts approach to reading because they believe the students are more comfortable with a "culturally sensitive" approach, one which maintains elements of "rote learning" and a continued emphasis on translation and external testing. Accordingly, this leads to beliefs that Asian students will always show a preference for learning styles which are regarded in the Western tradition as "not good"; that is, "low cognitive level learning strategies" (i.e., memorization and surface learning) associated with poor learning outcomes (p. 46).

The problem with these beliefs, as many of us teaching in East Asia can attest, is that they are not true. As Biggs states, large scale, repeated studies show that Asian learners "in almost every case" have a stronger preference than Western learners for "… high-level, meaning-based, learning strategies," and a

similarly stronger avoidance of rote learning (p. 49). Yet such is the saturating power of Western assumptions about Asian learning styles that repetitive learning strategies can be mistaken for rote learning; stated eagerness by Asian students for project and research work can go unrecognized; and an equal if not superior potential for a liberal education goes unexplored.

At Mahidol University, we seek to challenge the assumptions reflected in the way reading is often approached in Thai EFL classrooms. Because of the instrumental nature of most courses, the reading skills that are taught are very often based on translation accuracy and equivalency, the answering of "comprehension questions," and test-preparation and exam-passing strategies. In our English for Liberal Arts approach, much time is spent on issue- and theme-based readings (such as a series of readings challenging contemporary conceptions of race, gender, or technology) and encouraging students to evaluate the purposes and worth of those texts so that they may develop the intellectual openness and curiosity associated with the Western liberal education tradition.

Lectures in ELA

English for Liberal Arts lectures tend to be distinct in two ways from CLT, CBLT, and EAP/ESP approaches to lectures. As with reading materials discussed above, lectures should be integrated with across-the-curriculum, inquiry-based, issue-oriented syllabi rather than as stand-alone lectures which primarily deliver information (i.e., content) and focus principally on comprehension and note-taking skills. In this way, ELA lectures present students with analysis and arguments that augment, amplify, or even counter the viewpoints they are engaging in their readings and discussions. ELA lectures are meant to stimulate the student audience to reflect more deeply upon their own opinions, conduct further research and analysis for themselves, and make connections between disciplines. Furthermore, such lectures are

"authentic" in the sense that they are not intended only for listening practice—though that is an equally important aim—but to encourage students to critically appraise the perspectives and issues they are encountering in their courses. In this manner, they also model for the students the intellectual openness and curiosity assumed and advocated by a liberal arts approach.

To achieve these aims, however, they must essentially be "good lectures," and giving such lectures is both an art and a science. After all, English for Liberal Arts lectures, like all competent academic lectures, involve transfer of information from one person to many so that the recipients of the information will be able to remember and also to later apply the information conveyed. For both of these learning outcomes to occur the audience must remain interested during the lecture or presentation, despite the often academically dense subject matter. This is arguably more so in the case of liberal arts as a liberal arts approach expects the students to make connections among different academic disciplines and ideas in a way non-liberal arts colleges do not, as non-liberal arts classes, including CBLT and ESP/EAP classes, tend to focus on one discipline only rather than attempt to blend disciplines together, as we advocate for in an English for Liberal arts approach.

To date there has been much research done on how to improve presentations and much of this builds on the work done by cognitive scientists on how brains process and store information, and on the work of designers to improve the visual quality of presentation slides to also improve information retention. Mayer (2001) and Medina (2011) have both written extensively on cognitive issues and their work has influenced the incorporation of Picture Superiority Effect and Segmentation Theory into presentation practice. In short, PSE has shown that visuals are much better than text on slides for audience information retention purposes. So the old 1-7-7 presentation rule (one point per slide, a maximum of seven bullet points per slide, and a

maximum of seven words per bullet point) that many lecturers use is out of date. However, even this old rule of thumb was better than the "slide-uments" often seen on the screen during lectures (Duarte, 2008). Much work has also been done on the design elements needed for good slides (Reynolds, 2008; Williams, 2009) and also on creating compelling narratives that keep the audience interested (Duarte, 2010; Gallo, 2009; Reynolds, 2010). When good slides are compared side by side with bad ones, the difference in clarity and ease of cognitive processing (and the later accessing of the information from memory) is pronounced. Therefore, in addition to curriculum framework, an inquiry-oriented format, and authenticity, English for Liberal Arts lectures ought to incorporate the important work of cognitive scientists and contemporary designers to effectively engage students and enable them to more efficiently remember and apply the content.

Writing in ELA

Learning how to write is learning how to think. For 1st-year university students, writing in an English for Liberal Arts program means learning how to have good reasons for their beliefs—and how to effectively communicate those reasons in a clear persuasive manner.

It goes without saying, of course, that instructors also need to have good reasons for their beliefs about writing. Teaching in college, instructors should no longer rely on a set of memorized rules about what good writing is: rules like "You can't use contractions," "You shouldn't use 'I' in academic writing," and "You can't start a sentence with 'But' or 'And.'" Teaching writing in the liberal arts should be about what students can do with writing, not about what they can't do.

In order to get students thinking about reasons starting with the first writing class, one approach used in the English for

Liberal Arts program at ICU is to ask students to respond briefly (~100 words) to a question such as, "Do you agree or disagree (or both) with the Ministry of Education's proposal to require English education for all primary school students? Why?" That second sentence, "Why?" is the key. In Japan, for instance, each student already has some opinion about this widely known proposal, and by asking them to give reasons, we've started teaching them writing and critical thinking skills as an integrated whole.

It isn't necessary to tell them they are going to learn how to write a paragraph that eventually becomes an essay (though they will learn how to do that)—rather, ask them what they think about something and why they think that way. This shift changes everything. By asking student writers to engage a question gets them to become aware of the need for reasons, for evidence, for dealing with opposing views, and for critical thinking.

With this reason-based approach, students come to see the elements of writing such as unity, coherence, emphasis, parallelism, and conciseness as tools to more clearly and persuasively present their ideas, not as discrete skills they ought to learn in order to somehow improve their writing.

In other words, these traditional elements of writing are taught almost subversively while working with the student writer's ideas. For example, in student peer conferences or a one-to-one teacher-student writing tutorial, one of the best questions to ask a student is, "Which point here do you want to emphasize most?" The answer then leads to a micro-lesson on emphasis—that the emphasized idea is better at the end of the sentence, or in a later paragraph. In a similar way, other elements such as topic sentences, thesis statements, transitions, and conclusions are presented as means to effectively articulate reasons and ideas.

In order to teach forms but never formulas, two other points must briefly be mentioned. First, students need to learn how to

move their arguments forward, paragraph by paragraph, to a deeper development of their ideas. They need to move beyond the pattern of a five-paragraph essay with each topic sentence referring backwards to a thesis statement.

This forward-moving pattern encourages each advancing paragraph to develop an idea further by adding, for example, more explanation, examples, implications, or consequences. When students read examples of this type of writing, they quickly see how skilled writers can handle ideas that lead to other related ideas.

The second point is that students must become aware of opposing points of view. Part of the liberal arts experience is that students learn how to enter into the academic community. Right from the first class, students should recognize that no matter what topic they choose to write about, others have already thought about it and offered an opinion. An English for Liberal Arts student writer needs to discover how his or her opinion fits into that ongoing conversation. Thus, the student writer must learn how to acknowledge or concede to an opposing point of view.

Finally, to stress a fundamental earlier point, writing in the liberal arts ought to be about what students can do with writing—its explorative and liberating potential. Thus, English for Liberal Arts students should be encouraged to write in a variety of rhetorical modes. Of course, they need to learn the persuasive/argumentative form, but because one of the purposes of a liberal arts education is to learn more about oneself, the personal narrative form should also be an essential writing assignment.

Assessment in an ELA Program

Any time we test our students, we are sending them an important message. Obviously, the content shows them what we think is important, but the overall message we send involves much more than that. For example, the type and amount of information shared with the students before the test, whether the test is multiple-choice, short-answer, or an essay test, and the evaluation and feedback of the students' performance on the test all convey intent and emphasis to our students. When designing tests for evaluating our students under an English for Liberal Arts paradigm, we want to ensure that we are imparting to them that the mission of liberal arts is at least as important as the goal to improve their English. There are a number of ways to reflect this emphasis throughout the evaluation process.

For instance, a key principle in a liberal arts education is to encourage students to be active, independent learners. At ICU and Mahidol, two ways we encourage this are by having tests be program-wide and by clearly indicating what will be covered on the test, either by giving a series of questions from which the actual test questions will be derived or by giving the students a description of the core concepts. Both facilitate discourse outside the classroom among the students themselves and between the students and teachers. In addition to encouraging students to be more active, this also helps them become more independent learners by taking responsibility to consider test content not only individually but also collectively, such as by forming study groups and discussion boards.

Liberal arts principles can be reinforced in an English for Liberal Arts program through testing format as well. Using argument-based short-answer and essay tests with meaningful, authentic prompts allows students to not only be more active but also to engage in the kind of self-reflection liberal arts hopes to promote. For example, as part of a bioethics unit, we have used a writing prompt asking the students to indicate whether and under what circumstances they would donate their organs, a question asked to every Japanese citizen when they receive a health insurance card. By responding to such a prompt, students not only need to be able to apply terms and concepts from their

readings, lectures and class discussions, but also to critically reflect on who they are and how they relate to the world they live in, issues which responsible global citizens need to contend with.

Finally, liberal arts principles can be incorporated into the final phase of evaluation: test results. Having feedback sessions after tests is important, yet this can be taken a step further by allowing students to challenge—and possibly change—their grades. This practice motivates students, somewhat de-centers and democratizes authority in the classroom, and underscores that knowledge (and answers) are relative rather than absolute. Yet another way to keep students involved and active and place them at the center of their own education is to have them do self-assessment, individually or in groups. We have had particular success with teacher and student each doing separate assessments, and then comparing evaluations. These are only a few of the possible avenues to connect liberal arts and testing, and make them both integral to the learning process.

Conclusion

The main thrust of our argument is that current paradigms of language teaching fall short of the needs and aspirations of contemporary university language students, particularly in Asia, because the ultimate outcome of their instruction tends to be acquiring and reproducing language rather than broader, more holistic, more intellectual, and more inquiry-based educational growth. While Western heritage teachers have often themselves benefited from such an approach, a cultural astigmatism appears to sometimes cloud their vision of what Asian students are ready and willing to accomplish in the language classroom. Although this paper was restricted in length and required the authors to limit their discussion and make significant generalizations and simplifications, they have tried to show how key principles of the liberal arts tradition may provide a powerful

framework for a more engaging and liberating form of language teaching, with significant implications for pedagogy in traditional skill areas such as reading, writing, listening, and testing.

Bio Data

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