

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS: PROPOSITION 1

This chapter considers the first set of findings in relation to the central research question, namely, what are TESOL teachers' perspectives on the role of SMK in language teaching within the ELICOS setting? Collectively, the findings can be stated as follows: TESOL teachers see that their role as ELICOS teachers is solely to work within the set conditions of the workplace to teach ELICOS students the body of SMK stipulated in the ELICOS syllabus that will go towards helping them to realise their communication needs in English. From this emerges the first proposition of the study.

Proposition 1

TESOL teachers see their role as ELICOS teachers is solely to work within the set conditions of the workplace to teach ELICOS students a body of SMK that will go towards helping them to realise their communication needs in English.

This proposition states that ELICOS teachers' perspectives on their role in teaching ELICOS students a body of SMK are constrained by their perspective that their overall role is to work within the set conditions of the workplace. There are two main aspects to these set conditions. First, there are the actual employment conditions. Secondly, there is the expectation that the teachers teach to the set syllabus.

The ELICOS Employment Conditions

Teachers do not teach in a vacuum. How they work and what materials and activities they offer in class depend on the conditions under which they teach. Every work organisation has its own peculiarities and they influence teachers' actions. What teachers do also depend on the type of students they have to teach. These conditions at the study site will now be described below.

Many of the practices that are in place are in accordance to the NEAS accreditation guidelines, which have come about to safeguard against unprofessional operations more

interested in making money than in providing a professional service. The guidelines cover all the aspects of running an ELICOS college, from financial accountability to requirement of premises to the standard of service to be provided for students. There are regulations regarding the types of space required for students and teachers, maximum class size, hours of tuition, timetable, syllabuses, staff qualifications, and other student services (NEAS Accreditation Handbook, February, 2002). For example, it is stipulated that the maximum class size should be eighteen, and that no class should be held after 8.30 p.m. In addition, there should be adequate teaching resources in the form of coursebooks, audio and video tapes, computer software and so on, to the minimum value of at least \$100 per student based on proposed maximum enrolment. Thus, for the ELICOS program at DoLIE, which has a licence to teach 240 students at any one time, there should be resources to the value of AUD\$24,000. Placement tests, certificates of completion, counseling, orientation program and grievance procedures are some of the other requirements. NEAS requires its members to submit annual reports and to be open for inspection by NEAS inspectors. Failure to comply with NEAS regulations is likely to result in accreditation being withdrawn. All these criteria are to ensure that the ELICOS operation is professional. Teachers in the ELICOS program can expect these conditions to be met.

The ELICOS teachers at DoLIE are employed under the HECE Award for academic staff. Under the HECE Award, staff can be employed as tenured, contract or sessional staff. For a tenured staff position to be created, the department would need to go through the process of seeking approval at different levels. First, it needs to seek permission at faculty level, and then at divisional level, before it is allowed to be advertised. These positions are subjected to close scrutiny at all levels before permission is granted or denied. The reason for this is that there must be enough work guaranteed for tenured staff since they have employment until they retire or resign. Tenured staff members receive many benefits, which are not available to short-term, contract or sessional staff. They receive a generous superannuation contribution from the university, have paid leave and sick leave, holiday pay and long service leave. They also have their fees for higher education paid for by the university if the study is for a higher degree related to work. As a result of all these benefits enjoyed by tenured staff, the Division of Humanities of which DoLIE is a part, requires strong justification for

any new tenured position that DoLIE seeks. Therefore, very few such positions are offered.

Contract positions also require approval at various administrative levels but justification for them is less rigorous than tenured positions. Contract positions are for out-of-the ordinary tasks that are not within the usual business of the department. For example, contracts are usually given to staff employed for specially funded research projects. They are not expected to last longer than a year or two. Teachers involved in ELT at DoLIE do not fall into this category as the work they do is the usual work of the department.

Most teaching positions in the ELT section of DoLIE are filled by sessional staff. Sessional positions only need the approval of the Head of Department (HOD). Such staff members are classified as tutors and are paid tutorial rates for the hours they work. An arrangement is made whereby they get \$78 for the first hour and \$53 for subsequent hours of each unit they teach. All pre-tertiary teaching staff who are not tenured are employed as sessional tutors. They are only employed after all the tenured staff have received their full quota of work. Tenured staff are expected to teach across all the programs if they have the expertise to do so. The number of sessional staff to be employed in each program will then depend on the amount of work left that cannot be completed by the tenured staff. This number depends on the size of the student population in each program. Sessional staff can usually expect work for between five to ten weeks each time if they work in the ELICOS program.

The ELICOS teachers, both tenured and sessional, do not see themselves as fitting into the mould of the university academic. They do not teach a mainstream university course; their students are not necessarily university students; they do not need higher qualifications to do their job although it is actively encouraged, and if they do further their study, it is because they love the subject or because they want to move into mainstream teaching. Furthermore, they are not expected to publish papers or carry out research. Many ELICOS teachers feel that they only need to focus on teaching their students. This is the scope of work that they see for themselves.

At the time of data collection, tenured teachers taught for a maximum of forty weeks a year. Since the beginning of 2004, that teaching load has been reduced to thirty-five weeks per year. Sessional teachers may now opt to teach for forty-five weeks (or nine modules) with the recent change to nine intakes a year. Prior to this, the ELICOS program was administered as four terms with each term comprising two five-week modules and an intake at the start of each module.

Because of the way the curriculum has been structured, two teachers are responsible for the teaching of one morning class. This arrangement is fixed. One teacher is responsible for providing instruction on writing, reading and grammar on Monday, Wednesday and Friday while another teaches speaking and listening on Tuesday and Thursday. Usually, the teacher who takes the class for three mornings is considered the main teacher and is responsible for the collation of marks for the students of his or her class.

The two teachers must work as a team. They need to liaise with each other regarding students' progress and the topics and materials to be given to students. In the Developing English (DE) levels, this team work involves making sure that each teacher is not teaching parts of the coursebook that are reserved for the other teacher. At the time of data collection, the DE classes followed the *Headway* series of coursebooks and the two class teachers had to divide up the materials for each lesson so that the main teacher only taught parts of the lesson where the focus was on language study, writing and reading, leaving the rest to the second teacher. If the teachers do not meet to discuss beforehand what they will be teaching, there is a possibility that one of them might use material meant for the other teacher.

If there is more than one class at the same level, teachers must work closely with the other parallel teachers to make sure that their individual classes are using the same materials for the teaching of the major language skills of the syllabus. In part, this is to prevent the perception among students that they are being short changed because they are not doing the same things as the other class. A high degree of coordination is required to ensure that the teachers are keeping pace with each other.

There is always a degree of uncertainty surrounding teaching in the ELICOS program. Teachers do not know exactly what class they will be teaching until the last minute after all new students have sat for the placement test. Although teachers are asked to state their preferences for the level they wish to teach for the coming term and the DoS tries to accommodate where possible, it is difficult to predict what the number of new students will be in the different levels of English with every new intake.

Additionally, teachers must cope with new students coming into the classroom at different times. Not all students arrive on time for the start of the module. It is quite normal to have new students joining the class throughout the first week of each module. There is also a reshuffle involving a very small number of students at the end of the first week after the class teachers have had an opportunity to assess the students' language performance in the class. Occasionally, students are allowed to join the class in the third or fourth week of the module and teachers have to deal with such disruptions. Although it is not the policy of the ELICOS program to enroll students so late in the module, this is done when the case is deemed exceptional. Such late arrivals can prove disruptive as can be seen in Joanne's account of when two new students joined her class in Week 3 of the module:

Wednesday was another day of disaster session like today. I was going to do the test and all that. Then two new students joined the class from Qatar, _____ and _____ who were in class today. ...They had no idea where they were or what they were meant to be doing ... I had a huge problem with these two boys because they wanted one-to-one attention and the rest of the class couldn't ask anything and then the German girl, finally, in frustration said, "Well, I want to do some writing" (Joanne; intv1.4)

On the one hand, there is a need to help the new students to settle quickly into the learning environment, and on the other, there is the responsibility to ensure that the rest of the class is not neglected. Teachers often find it difficult to get the right balance especially when some of the students are very demanding and expect a lot of individual attention.

Another condition which ELICOS teachers have to accept is their students' uneven knowledge about the subject matter. The student population can be made up of some

students who have completed one module at that level, a few who have come up from a lower level, some new arrivals from overseas and some perhaps from other ELICOS colleges. There can be a knowledge gap between the students who have completed one module at that level and the other students, particularly the new arrivals from overseas. Students who have followed the ELICOS system would have the knowledge of the meta-language which the ELICOS teachers use in teaching while others have none. As Rosa explains:

Yeah, what happens is if you have a class who all came into Ac2 and they'd all done Ac1, you wouldn't have to spend long revising the whole idea of essay structure and topic sentences and coherence and cohesion and that kind of thing, but because you've got some coming from Ac1 to Ac2, some coming from outside, you have to spend the first two or three sessions revising ... so, it's revision for the old people and it's new for the new people... (Rosa, intv1.3)

Teachers have to find ways of dealing with this unequal knowledge.

In addition to managing a class with unequal explicit knowledge of the language structure, teachers may also have to deal with a class in which students' language proficiency differs quite greatly. The classes in the ELICOS program are organised according to ELP level. This is the reason for the placement test. However, it is not always possible to have students with almost equal ELP in one class. The degree of variation in ELP in one class depends on a number of factors. The first is the ELP of continuing students. Occasionally, among students who are already in the ELICOS program, there are a few students who insist on going up one level even when their assessment results indicate that they are not linguistically ready for language instruction at a higher level. Because ELICOS courses are non-award courses, there is no requirement for students to repeat a level until they have acquired a satisfactory level of proficiency. Students may be counseled to repeat, but if they insist on moving up their wishes are usually accommodated. Thus, among the students who are promoted to the next level may be one or two who should be repeating the same level.

Mixed proficiency classes may also be the outcome of financial consideration. Sometimes, it is not financially viable to have two classes with small numbers. Therefore, a common practice is to merge the two groups of students into one. The

class teachers then have to take this into account in lesson preparation and in teaching. A disparate level of ELP within the class may also occur if a student who arrives late cannot get a place in the appropriate class because the class is full. Under NEAS regulations, the maximum number of students within a class is eighteen. The DoS then has to place them in another class so as not to disrupt the learning of students already settled in the class.

The diverse nature of the students themselves also creates difficulties for the ELICOS teachers. Students in the ELICOS program at DoLIE are predominantly from Asia. The students come from Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. These countries have different educational systems and cultures. Furthermore, students with three different types of goals come to study English at DoLIE. First, there are students who need to learn English for further study; second, there are those who wish to study English while holidaying in Australia; and third, there are students who see the ability to use English as a way of improving their career prospects.

Normally, those studying in the ELICOS program at DoLIE have further study as their goal and a large number want to reach a level of proficiency whereby they gain entry into either the English Language Bridging Course (ELBC) or Foundation Studies (FS) within DoLIE, or Curtin International College (CIC). However, ELBC, FS or CIC, are only stepping stones to mainstream university. The ELBC offers only ELT to students with intentions of undertaking undergraduate and post-graduate study at the university. These students have already met the university's matriculation requirements, but not English requirements. The FS is a total package that prepares students who have not matriculated for entry into undergraduate study. The CIC, which is a private college within the university, offers certificate and diploma courses. The CIC diplomas can be upgraded to a degree as the university gives advance standing for CIC diploma units.

In contrast, the number for students learning English while on holiday or for career purposes is small in the ELICOS program at DoLIE. Therefore, although the curriculum structure is created to accommodate three streams of study at the upper intermediate and advanced levels (Academic, Professional and General English), there has never been a sufficient number of students to form a wholly Professional or General English class.

Instead, these two groups of students have always needed to be combined into one class and what is taught is negotiated with the class. Most of the students requesting a course in Professional or General English come from Japan or Europe. For these students, formal language learning is only part of the total experience of being in Australia.

The students range in language proficiency from an elementary level to an advanced level. Students focused on further study usually stay in the ELICOS program until they have achieved the necessary English grade to proceed to the next stage of their study. This may range from between five to forty weeks in duration. However, the number who stay for five weeks are very few and they are usually students who have already obtained the required English language proficiency to commence study in the course of their choice. Many such students are merely in the ELICOS program because they have been advised to get some more ELT. The length of study for students on holiday and those wanting to improve their English for career enhancement is more variable. This can range from five weeks to as long as one year. The ones who study five weeks are usually those on tourist visas.

Regardless of the time these students have, the ELICOS teachers see it as their role to teach them so that they can advance a little in their ELP. Thus, for upper intermediate level students with plans to further their study, the aim is to teach them academic English that will help them to cope with study in the courses after they leave the ELICOS program. For those who are at elementary or intermediate levels, the ELICOS teachers see it as their job to equip them with more general English so that they have a foundation for studying academic English. For the students who are in the General/Professional (G/P) English class, the goal, again, is to help improve their general English. The actual amount of time available for teaching is short. On account of the fact that the first part of Week 1 is taken up with administrative matters and orientation, and the final week for examinations, teachers have, in fact, only three-and-a-half weeks for serious teaching.

At the same time, all is not hardship in the life of the ELICOS teachers at this research site. To support them in their work, ELICOS teachers have access to a lot of teaching mediums and resources. One of the advantages of working within the university is that there are rooms and equipment that are designed for different kinds of learning and

many of these are available to the ELICOS teacher as long as booking for their use is made in advance. Thus, if a teacher wishes students to process their writing in a computer laboratory, they can do so, and if they wish their students to deliver power-point presentations, it is also possible. Furthermore, the teachers can use the large lecture theatres to simulate real lectures when teaching lecture note-taking skills. The teachers have access to the internet and there is good technical support. In addition, they can make use of all the resources in the library including the electronic databases as university staff. Within the ELICOS program itself, there are books, audio and videotapes, newspapers and journals, which teachers can use for their lessons and for reference. There are also professional development workshops run by mainstream lecturers on different aspects of language study, which the ELICOS teachers are invited to attend in addition to special workshops, which specifically cater to the needs of the program. The ELICOS teachers themselves also conduct workshops of their own. ELICOS teachers can participate in ELT projects which arise often. For example, some ELICOS teachers are currently engaged in writing materials for the ELICOS course to be delivered on line. Opportunities to gain offshore teaching experience also occur regularly as DoLIE has links with companies overseas that offer ELT. Therefore, ELICOS teachers in DoLIE have the opportunity to be involved various types of teaching and TESOL projects unlike many of their counterparts in other ELICOS colleges.

In summary, teachers working in the ELICOS program have to accept the working conditions that are far from ideal. The majority do not have job security as their contracts are only for the duration of ten weeks each time. They do not know until the last minute the exact grade level they will be teaching each five-week module. This does not allow them much time for lesson preparation. Furthermore, they have a rather short time within which to teach their students as they have only about three and a half weeks to carry out actual teaching for each module. ELICOS teachers also have to deal with students coming into the class at different times in the course of a term. Sometimes these students come in at an awkward time of the module, such as in the middle of the module. This creates more work for the teacher who already finds it difficult enough to teach the content of the syllabus within the time available. Making sure that the new student is taught the content, which the rest of the class has already been taught will take time that the teacher does not have. The task is already difficult

enough as students coming into each class have different knowledge about the subject matter. ELICOS teachers also have to cope with the differences in ELP and with different goals among the students. All of these set the context in which the ELICOS teacher has to work and they exert a great influence on the way he/she goes about teaching students the body of SMK which is stipulated in the syllabus.

The ELICOS syllabus

Within the wider parameters of the ELICOS working conditions already discussed, another constraining factor on ELICOS teachers' perspectives on their role in teaching ELICOS students a body of SMK is the ELICOS syllabus. What students have to learn at each level is stated in the ELICOS syllabus. This syllabus is written in modules to be taught at each proficiency level every five weeks. Each level comprises two modules of five weeks duration. The average student normally needs to study two modules of the same level before he/she can proceed to the next level. Only students with exceptionally good grades are given the choice of skipping the second module to the next level.

The present ELICOS syllabus for the morning classes consists of a set of unit outlines for each of the two modules in every level. They are articulated in terms of what students will be taught in the four macro-skills of writing, reading, speaking and listening. All the outlines are rather brief, containing a list of topics that will be covered in the course of each week. This list is a mixture of sub-skills, genres, language points and activities. If it is an outline for a DE class, the outline normally has a language component in it, while the outlines for the academic English classes focus on sub-skills and genres. A brief description of the outlines for the different classes will now be outlined.

Developing English (DE) syllabus

As the elementary-to-intermediate level (DE level) classes follow a set course book which is the *Headway* series (1996), it is easy to see what SMK students are required to learn in each module. The DE syllabus follows quite closely the framework set by the *Headway*. DE1 uses *Headway* Elementary and DE2 uses *Headway* pre-intermediate.

Headway Intermediate is shared between DE3 and DE4 as they are both intermediate in level. DE 3 uses the first half of the book while DE4 uses the second half. The *Headway* series of books claim that they retain the good aspects of traditional language teaching and incorporate new methods where appropriate. The books place a strong emphasis on grammatical structures and a large proportion of each unit is devoted to the presentation of language structures using the four macro-skills. According to one of the authors of the book:

(G)rammar is the engine behind the language; it's what makes the rest of the language stick together. From a learning point of view, if there is an understanding of the way the language works, it helps in decoding when you're reading and listening, and it certainly helps in encoding when you're trying to produce message, and to try and deny that languages are grammar based, is ... wrong. Students know that grammar exists – grammar is a short-cut.

http://www.teflfarm.com/teacher/interviews/interview_lizjohn_soars.htm

Therefore, one of the core areas of SMK, which students in the DE classes have to learn is grammar. Nevertheless, grammar is not the only aspect of language that is taught. The coursebook also has a lexical syllabus and one for language in use as well as a macro-skills-based syllabus. Each unit of work provides students with the opportunity to practise these aspects of language.

Academic English (Ac) syllabus

There is greater emphasis on the teaching of micro skills associated with each macro-skill in the Academic English syllabus. The focus is on micro- skills, which are deemed to be important for students to know if they are to pursue further study in Australian universities. They include skills such as identifying main ideas, major and minor details, making inferences, understanding text organisation and how information is presented in various organisations, and guessing meanings of words in context in reading. In writing, the emphasis is on writing an academic essay – the overall structure, notions of unity, cohesion and coherence within a paragraph, between paragraphs and the whole essay. Although the academic essay is taught in all the levels of the academic classes, the level of sophistication and cognitive processing for the essays for each level differ. For example, Ac1 students are expected to write a descriptive essay while Ac3 students are required to produce a researched essay. The

same rationale goes for the speaking syllabus where all the academic levels have oral presentations, but the difference is that these oral presentations differ in complexity and difficulty. Again, in presentation, focus is on the structuring of the oral presentation. In listening, lecture note-taking skills are taught. These skills relate to understanding the structure of texts and the structure of speech so that students know how to interpret and anticipate vital information through interpreting tones, stress, pauses and so on. It is important to note that all the micro-skills go towards the completion of a task such as giving a presentation based on a survey, or writing an academic essay that requires research.

General/Professional (G/P) syllabus

Unlike the academic syllabus where there are specific micro-skills on which teachers need to focus, micro-skills in the G/P syllabus are more dependent on the goals of the students and may change from module to module. However, the syllabus used to date has been a general English syllabus based on topic themes. The exact materials and tasks are determined only after the teachers have met the students of the class. In some modules, the students are asked to work towards a big project such as the production of a magazine comprising a compilation of their work for the whole module. In other modules, students are asked to produce work on a weekly basis. Much depends on the teachers and also on how far they can enthuse the students to cooperate in big scale projects. The G/P syllabus has the greatest flexibility in terms of the body of knowledge to be taught as the broad aim of the G/P course is to make students more proficient in communicating in English.

Assessments

Assessments form an important part of the teaching program. They are the method used for determining how well students have learnt the stipulated subject matter. There is both on-going and end-of-module testing in all four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Over the years, a bank of tests has been established and teachers today do not need to write their own tests if they do not wish to. However, many teachers tend to take existing tests and modify them to suit their students' level of English. This has created some debate as there are those who feel that these tests should not be modified if they

are used for gate-keeping, but there are others who feel that such rigidity does not contribute to the betterment of the program. One of the arguments put forth is that there has been no over-all coordination of the test papers to ensure a consistent and progressive level of linguistic difficulty of tasks and texts especially from DE4 upwards. Moreover, the tests have not been systematically tested for validity.

Electives syllabus

Offerings of electives are based on student demand. Therefore, the SMK of these units cater for students' perceived needs. In the late 1980s when there were more students studying English for personal development and for travel around Australia, there was a greater variety of electives. Some of the popular electives included English for Sports, and Australian Studies. However, with more students wanting to improve their English for study purposes, the electives requested seem to fall into two categories – those that prepare students for a university-recognised English test, and those that focus on the fundamental aspects of English. In respect to the first category of electives, IELTS preparation is very popular. The IELTS preparation elective focuses on strategies for completing all the types of tasks that are found in the IELTS test. In regard to the second category, the electives offered include grammar and writing, vocabulary and reading, speaking and listening, and integrated skills. The focus of each elective depends on the nature of the elective. There is, therefore, no set SMK for the elective units as they are dependent on student demand.

There is an expectation that the mastery of the body of SMK in the ELICOS syllabus at every level will eventually lead students to realise their goals for learning English. This appears to be the reason why student counsellors and education agents advise their clients to pursue formal language courses. The responsibility is on the provider of the ELICOS program to make sure that the syllabus it offers can meet the expectations of the students. This means that the learning program it offers, including the syllabus, must be well considered and pedagogically sound. Decisions on how to unpack a complex phenomenon like language, what aspects of language to include as subject matter and how to sequence that subject matter in a manner that facilitates learning are drawn from scholarly works undertaken in subject disciplines related to language and

language teaching. In this case, it is the insights gained from studies in linguistics, sociolinguistics and branches of study that were spawned by sociolinguistics such as discourse analysis, pragmatics, and conversational analysis, and language acquisition. The last discipline provide more understanding on how to sequence the subject matter while the rest have direct bearing on what subject matter to include in the syllabus itself.

Conclusion

This proposition upon which this chapter is based states that there are wide parameters that constrain ELICOS teachers' perspective on SMK in language teaching within the ELICOS setting in a tertiary institution. Foremost are the employment conditions for teachers in the ELICOS program. Most of the ELICOS teachers are employed as sessional staff and as such, they are employed only when the work available is more than can be handled by tenured staff at DoLIE. Thus, the majority of the ELICOS teachers cannot be certain about their employment beyond ten weeks each time. ELICOS teachers are also uncertain about the exact level that they will be teaching in each term because it is difficult to know the exact number of students in each ELICOS level until the results of the placement test are known. This is usually on the Friday before the commencement of a module. Owing to the fact that students can enter the program at the start of each five-week module and exit at the end of the module, actual teaching time for the ELICOS teacher is approximately three and a half weeks. Additionally, they have to contend with new students joining the class at different times, as well as students with different knowledge about the subject matter and differences in ELP.

Then, within these parameters, their perspective is further constrained by the fact that there is an officially prescribed syllabus to which they have to work. As stated earlier, the ELICOS program is designed such that there are core classes in the morning to which students are assigned based on their ELP and elective classes in the afternoon which students are allowed to choose for themselves. For the core morning classes, there is a set syllabus for each level of the ELICOS and there are set tasks for assessments. Teachers are expected to teach their students so that they are able to carry out the assessment tasks. Similarly for the elective classes, there is also an established

outline and while not as rigid as the morning syllabus, teachers are expected to follow that outline. The working conditions and the official syllabus exert a strong influence on the ELICOS teachers' perspective on SMK in their teaching.