ESOL teachers as service providers

Abstract

While ESOL teachers are perceived principally as educators and linguists, the fact that most TESOL institutions are essentially commercial service operations suggests that ESOL teachers should also be regarded as service providers. ESOL teachers have a number of fundamental roles in common with front-line service providers in a range of service industries, namely participant/co-communicator, organiser/manager, controller and resource/consultant adviser. They also share a number of essential communicative, interpersonal and reflective/analytical skills. The perception of the service interaction as akin to a theatrical production is particularly applicable to ESOL teacher-student interactions. ESOL teacher work is therefore seen to fit comfortably within the dimensions of classical services theory and practice. ESOL teachers as service providers are largely responsible for the generation of functional quality within TESOL operations and as such, can potentially create considerable competitive advantage for their firms. The implications are that key services management themes should characterise the management of TESOL operations and that ESOL teacher training and professional development should not be confined to such subjects as pedagogy alone but should also include elements of services theory and practice.

Introduction

The application of business concepts to TESOL is a contentious issue. ESOL teachers may experience conflict between their role as linguists and educators and the demands of a commercial business operation. While personal dedication to a professional teaching ethos is commendable, the fact is that TESOL is an industry (Strevens 1987) that enjoys a billion-dollar turnover worldwide. Since commercial TESOL operations exist within a competitive environment, success is likely to be linked to sound business practice. This may involve ESOL teachers heeding Meinke’s (1990: 760) call to ‘begin applying the useful disciplines of the business world to their activities’.

A key aspect of such a view of ESOL teacher work is the issue of whether ESOL teachers are service providers or not. While Crichton (1994: 11), for example, maintains that the student’s relationship with the TESOL organisation as a paying customer may require ‘the teacher's role to incorporate that of service provider in the marketing chain, making the teacher accountable to the client for the product supplied’, even those ESOL teachers who embrace the commercial realities of TESOL may draw the line at being...
described as such, particularly if they perceive themselves as being equated with workers in stereotypical service industries. The fact is, however, that nowadays the term service applies to a wide range of enterprise types, including professional services such as law, accountancy, health care, banking, the arts and even the church (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons 1994). Each service type may possess unique characteristics depending on the nature of the service provided, the clientele or particular expertise of the service providers. Despite this diversity, they share a number of core characteristics which identify them as services, for example intangibility, the inseparability of production and consumption, customer participation and the importance of the provider-customer interaction (Brown, Gummesson, Edvardsson and Gustavsson 1991; Gronroos 1990). These characteristics have been described within the general context of TESOL to demonstrate that TESOL operations are essentially service operations and a model of the TESOL service operation has been developed (Walker 1999). The implication therefore is that ESOL teachers — particularly if they are working in a commercial environment — should also be regarded as service providers.

ESOL teacher essentials have been conceptualised as consisting of an experience base, an affective base and a knowledge base (Richard-Amato 1996). These are likely to comprise classroom experience, attitudes, motivation and empathy as well as themes such as a grounding in linguistic theory and second language acquisition, a knowledge of teaching methodology, and familiarity with learner needs and language learning strategies. Whilst these essential ESOL teacher prerequisites are acknowledged — and to some extent are an operationalisation of them — a number of related key roles and skills can also be identified which are typical of ESOL teacher work. These roles and skills demonstrate a surprising commonality with classic service provider fundamentals as described in the services management literature, and represent a singular insight into the service provider aspect of ESOL teacher work.

**ESOL teacher service provider roles**

Writers in the services literature (Gronroos 1990; Bitran and Hoech 1992; Palmer and Cole 1995) identify the key roles of service providers as participant/co-communicator, manager, consultant and controller. TESOL writers (Littlewood 1981; Harmer 1991) have used virtually identical terminology to describe some of the key roles of ESOL teachers.

**Participant/co-communicator**

Most services are based on a personal interaction between a service provider and a customer. Services research and practice stress the importance of the service provider as participant in this interaction since it ‘defines the quality of the service in the mind of the customer’ (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons 1994: 161). Research evidence (Armistead and Clark 1994) has found that
service provider attitudes in their interactions with customers are perceived to be among the most important factors for customer retention and repeat business. Indeed, as Buzzell and Gale (1987: 111, cited in Gronroos 1990: 36) state: ‘Quality [of service] is whatever the customers say it is and the quality of a particular service ... is what the customers perceive it to be.’

The concept of the teacher–student(s) interaction is likewise seen as a key concept in TESOL and the notion of interactive teaching as a central plank of interactive-communicative TESOL methodology (Rivers 1987; Richard-Amato 1996). According to Richard-Amato (1996), the participants in the interaction are affected and frequently changed by it and the surrounding social situation. Such interaction is important since it is not only integral to sound methodological practice but is likely to provide one of the rare opportunities for learners to experience quality target language input (Harmer 1991; Nunan 1991). The nature of the teacher–student interaction is therefore likely not only to influence students’ attitudes to and success in the second language but also their attitude towards the teacher and the institution.

**Organiser/manager**

Service providers often have to ‘manage’ the service interaction. This involves planning the activity, organising it in terms of, for example, assigning roles and tasks to customers and other service personnel and ensuring that the desired quality level is maintained. Part of this may be, for instance, explaining to the customer how to participate optimally in coproduction of the service (Palmer and Cole 1995). A bank, for instance, may need to ‘train’ customers in the use of a telebanking service. Bowen, Chase, Cummings and Associates (1990) give the example of airline personnel who may have to ‘train’ inexperienced air passengers informally in, for instance, checking in, going through security and getting ready for take-off.

The ESOL teacher likewise ‘manages’ classroom activities by planning them, ensuring that learning runs smoothly and effectively by assigning roles and tasks to students and providing clear instructions, initiating and closing activities, and verifying the effectiveness of what has been done through feedback and assessment. Some form of ‘training’ may be necessary since, according to Tudor (1996: 275), learner training ‘is a crucial part of the [second language] teacher’s role in the learner-centred approach’. This might include: developing learner familiarity with particular methodologies, grammar functions, register and appropriacy; learner awareness in terms of learning goals and learning options, as well as self-awareness as a language learner (Tudor 1996); learner strategies such as organising and evaluating their own learning or the effective use of cognitive processes (Brown 1994); or technical skills like the use of self-access facilities.

**Controller**

The issue of control is a significant one for service contact personnel. Since the customer and service provider are jointly involved in producing the
service, the question arises, who is in control of the process at any particular
time? While customers may wish to perceive that they are in control of
the situation (Gronroos 1990), ‘giving customers control over the service
process has a great destabilising potential’ (Bitran and Hoech 1992: 359).
The question of who actually should be in control may depend very much
on the type of service being provided. While a patient undergoing surgery
has no choice but to let the surgeon take over, clients of a solicitor may wish
to retain some control of the direction of their case. Often too, ‘in order
to keep uncertainty within manageable limits, client conduct within the
service organisation must be monitored and deviations from acceptable
behaviour minimised’ (Bowen et al 1990: 105). A doctor, for instance, with
a talkative patient and a full waiting room, may use control to expedite
matters. A service provider, therefore, should know when it is appropriate
to exercise control and when not to.

A similar situation applies within the TESOL classroom. There may be
occasions when the teacher has to be in a controlling role, for example,
when conducting learner training, introducing new language or doing lock-
step activities (Harmer 1991). However, at other times facilitation would
be more appropriate, for example, during more communicative–interactive
activities such as simulations, role plays, pair work or group work. Like other
service providers, a teacher must have the inherent flexibility to know when
it is appropriate to exercise control over the interaction — for the sake of
effective learning, and ultimately for the good of the student — and when
it is better to relinquish control partly or completely. A teacher who exercises
control inappropriately relative to the learning context may end up with
bored or confused students — or both. ESOL teachers likewise may be
required to minimise ‘deviations from acceptable behaviour’ (Bowen et al
1990: 105) in the classroom by exercising authority over disruptive students.

Resource, consultant, adviser

Service providers are often accorded a consultant or advisory role. This is
most evident in some of the professional service categories such as law,
accountancy or management consulting, of which a large part of the work
consists solely of doling out help and advice to clients. Simply being on call
to guide ongoing customer self diagnosis when problems arise has been
described as a key role of some service providers (Bitran and Hoech 1992),
for example in the area of computer use or health. Crosby (1991: 273) describes
the problem-solving role of some service providers in ‘providing expert
counselling on the customer’s present and future needs’, for example within
areas such as investment and insurance.

ESOL teachers adopt this role when they function as a language resource
within the classroom (Harmer 1991) or a source of guidance and help
(Brown 1994), providing ‘important psychological support for learners,
especially for those who are slow to develop independence’ (Littlewood
1981: 19). This could extend outside the classroom as the teacher advises
on personal learner short-term and long-term goals and strategies in terms, for example, of methodology, autonomous learning, study advice, or choice of tertiary institution.

**ESOL teacher service provider skills**

Within the services literature (for example, Irons 1994; Lovelock 1995), it is commonplace to attempt to identify sets of skills and attributes which successful service contact persons would be expected to possess. According to Brown (1994), numerous TESOL ‘experts’ have likewise listed desirable attributes of the ‘good’ language teacher. Such lists may differ in various ways and it would be dangerous to apply them superficially since, as Brumfit (1984) maintains, effective teaching is contingent on a complex array of factors within the teachers, the learners and the context. However, complementary to technical/pedagogical skills there are perhaps three fundamental skill areas that successful ESOL teachers would be expected to have mastered and which they have in common with other service providers: communicative skills, interpersonal skills and reflective or analytical skills.

**Communicative skills**

Services literature traditionally stresses appropriate communicative skills and behaviours on the part of the service contact person. A study by Bitran and Hoech (1992), for example, shows that customer satisfaction improves as service employee communication skill levels increase. Among the key skills found to be necessary are *active listening* and a *non-threatening communication style*. Schneider and Schechter (1992), Irons (1994) and Lovelock (1995) also stress the importance of *active listening* as a key skill for service providers. Tansik (1990) describes studies by Snyder (1974) and Tansik (1985) which report that service providers who are skilled at interpreting *non-verbal cues* from their customers have the highest levels of sales. Rossi (1993) stresses the use of *open-ended questions* and *reflective listening skills* such as paraphrasing.

Much second language pedagogy and research is likewise built around the use of communication on the part of both the learner and the teacher. Effective communicative skills are therefore almost taken for granted as being part of the repertoire of the TESOL professional. One much-researched area, for example, is ‘teacher talk’ which might involve communicative strategies such as *adaptations of speech rate and volume, illustrations, questions, rephrasing, simplification* and *prompting* (Richard-Amato 1996). Rivers (1987: 4) has commented on the use of communicative/interactive strategies in the classroom to convey and receive authentic messages which might mean using ‘non-verbal cues to add aspects of meaning beyond the nonverbal’. Nonverbal communicative behaviours such as *eye contact, gesture, facial expression* and *posture*, as well as *active listening* and the *use of silence*, are also commonly cited as useful teacher communication strategies.
Interpersonal skills and qualities

Findings from services research have ‘reinforced the commonsense position that the quality of interpersonal contact is vital in service encounters’ (Adelman, Ahuvia and Goodwin 1994: 140) since the front-line service provider represents the entire organisation in the eyes of the customer, and the attitudes, skills and competencies of providers can influence the success of an organisation. As Lovelock (1995: 211) writes, many organisations have become aware that ‘nurturing the skills and motivation of their people can create a source of competitive advantage’. Tansik (1990: 157) maintains that high contact service providers have a strong need for interpersonal skills — being ‘interpersonally pleasant and attractive’ and displaying ‘pleasant emotions’ to customers. Bitran and Hoech (1992: 347) also identify social sensitivity which involves not only ‘skilful adjusting of behaviour to fit demands of a [customer] call and … figuring out how others are likely to act and react [but also] … skilful use of control and assertion’. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry’s (1988) research found that empathy towards the customer on the part of service providers is one of the key service attributes that customers associate with service quality. Courtesy, helpfulness, professionalism, social skills and pleasing appearance are also commonly cited (Gronroos 1990; Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons 1994; Lovelock 1995).

ESOL teachers share this need for interpersonal skills since, according to Stevick (1980: 17), ‘the teacher is by far the most powerful figure in the classroom [and] sets the tone for the interpersonal atmosphere’. To Stevick (1980), the teacher’s manner, in particular, radiating enthusiasm for the task of teaching and conviction of its value, is the most important of the language teacher attributes. While it might be argued that ‘good’ second language teacher attributes may up to a point be context-dependent, a number of researchers have suggested desirable ESOL teacher qualities which correspond closely to those cited for other service providers. Since interactive language teaching involves facilitating willing student participation and initiative, according to Rivers (1987), emotional maturity, perceptiveness and sensitivity on the part of the teacher to the feelings of others are required. Among attributes offered by Finocchiaro (1989), Brown (1994) and Tudor (1996) are human intuition, cultural sensitivity, enjoyment of people, enthusiasm, warmth, humour, patience, friendly manner, sensitivity to student problems, as well as pleasing appearance, but again, empathy is seen to be particularly important. There is anecdotal evidence to suppose that while technical competence on the part of the ESOL teacher is indispensable, other things being equal, students will tend to rate highly a teacher who is warm, friendly and approachable.

Reflective/analytical skills

A number of writers on services management have stressed the need for reflective skills on the part of effective service providers. Irons (1994: 58), for instance, describes the need for what he calls ‘interpersonal competence’,
one element of which is ‘the capacity to learn from one’s experience of oneself’ during the service encounter. Bitran and Hoech (1992) conclude that a ‘reflective style’ is an important process skill of many front-line service workers, particularly when dealing with conflict. Rossi (1993) sees service contact persons as having the responsibility for continuous self-learning through activities such as reading, research and enquiry. Such self-analysis, it is felt, may lead to an appreciation of the wider service operation environment, as well as to continuous improvement and excellence.

Within TESOL service provision, this notion has its counterpart in the concept of ‘the reflective teacher’. In this capacity, the ESOL teacher is likely to assess ‘the origins, purposes and consequences of his or her work at all levels’ (Zeichner and Liston 1985, cited in Bartlett 1990: 202). This approach holds that by such systematic, critical analysis of self in a teaching context, the teacher will be able to effect continuous improvement of his/her work. As Bartlett (1990) says, moving away from the ‘how’ to the ‘what’ and ‘why’ enables the teacher to see teaching and management techniques as part of a broader educational purpose and to locate teaching within a broader socio-cultural context. While some might argue that the reflective approach on the part of the ESOL teacher may be operating at a far more sophisticated level than that required for some other service provider types, there is no denying that in both cases the technique is essentially the same and has a similar intention, namely, to provide improved or excellent service for the customer and also, perhaps, enhanced job satisfaction for the service provider.

The dramaturgy analogy

The concept of ‘the dramaturgy analogy’ has been used by a number of writers (Deighton 1994; Lovelock 1995; Palmer and Cole 1995) to describe the nature of the service encounter. This sees the entire service operation as akin to a theatre environment, with a ‘frontstage/onstage’ where service encounters occur; ‘performers’ (customer contact personnel); a ‘backstage’ where a production team works in support of the performers; and an ‘audience’ (customers). Before the performance, personnel may have to rehearse a ‘script’ (specific lines or formulae), attend rehearsals and be coached in specific behaviours such as eye contact or voice control and while onstage, wear a ‘costume’ (uniform or dress code).

While the dramaturgy analogy applies, for instance, in the various hospitality/leisure sectors (for example, hotel reception, restaurant), retail services and real estate sales, the TESOL operation represents a particularly pertinent application. A backstage crew (administrators) supports the actors (teachers) who perform onstage (classroom), coordinated and led by the director (TESOL manager/DoS), and play to an audience (students). Indeed, it is not uncommon for ESOL teachers to view their lesson as a performance, wear ‘a costume’ (for role plays), study ‘a script’ (lesson outline), and use ‘props’ (realia) to infuse their lesson with realism. They may get nervous
before going ‘onstage’ but overcome their nerves once they are ‘on’ and use artistic skills, exaggerated gestures and movements, mimicry and facial expressions as well as voice modulation and humour to win over the audience and even to get them to participate. Stevick (1980: 29) sees language teachers as essentially ‘performing’ and believes that there is in teaching a ‘requirement of play acting’ which involves teachers in ‘mask-changing’. Pennington (1991) similarly comments that one view of second language teaching is as a kind of artistic performance depending largely on the characteristics of a particular teacher.

Conclusions and implications

This article has argued that ESOL teachers are essentially service providers. It has also demonstrated that, in terms of some of the roles and skills required, as well as the nature of the work itself, ESOL teacher work already embodies classic service provider fundamentals. TESOL institutions — and particularly those commercial operations concerned about their performance — can capitalise on these existing strengths by assisting their teachers to become better acquainted with services management principles and therefore, as Kingsley (1998: 8) recommends, function as professional consultants and marketers ‘so that they see themselves as satisfying customers rather than just teaching students.’

There are good reasons for doing this. Commercial TESOL operations exist within a competitive environment where success is linked to creating service quality, a bi-dimensional construct consisting of technical quality and functional quality (Gronroos 1990). Technical quality is what the customer purchases. In terms of TESOL operations, technical quality might include the tangible aspects of the service provision such as self-access facilities, computers, decor, staff appearance and intangible aspects such as program content or even the professional qualifications of the teachers themselves. However, since it has become increasingly easier for competitors to produce a similar level of technical service quality (Heskett, Sasser and Hart 1990), it is now recognised that it is not the technical quality that truly differentiates one competitor from another but the functional quality, that is how the service is delivered.

Functional quality resides largely in the province of those service providers who have most potential to influence the customer’s perception of the quality of the service. In most TESOL operations, these are likely to be ESOL teachers themselves, whose attitudes and behaviours or service orientation affect ‘the quality of the interaction between ... the staff of any organization and its customers’ (Hogan, Hogan and Busch 1984: 167, cited in Gronroos 1990: 244). As service providers, therefore, ESOL teachers ‘arguably [represent] the most significant factor in any language teaching operation’ (McDonough and Shaw 1993: 284) and are a potential source of considerable competitive advantage for their firms.
While such a perspective on ESOL teacher work may be regarded as controversial, it has obvious implications for both TESOL management and for ESOL teacher training and professional development. It implies, first, that an integral part of the role of the TESOL Manager/Director of Studies should be to become familiar with service concepts as they apply to TESOL operations and to facilitate — should it not already exist — the development of a ‘climate for service’ (Schneider 1980) within their TESOL operations. Such themes could, in fact, be part and parcel of tertiary courses leading to qualifications in TESOL management. Furthermore, as Pennington (1994) rightly maintains, there is a need to incorporate training in management competencies into preparation for TESOL work. Specifically, in addition to the theory and practice of TESOL, ESOL teacher trainers, course developers and TESOL managers would be wise to introduce elements of services theory and practice into formal TESOL training courses and ongoing professional development sessions in order to promote among trainees as well as experienced teachers not only an awareness but also an acceptance of their role as service providers. Suggested topics for inclusion in such courses might be:

- Creating a climate for TESOL service
- Applying services management concepts to the TESOL service
- Understanding the service encounter
- Managing the TESOL institution’s service strategy
- Managing teacher–service provider role conflict
- Developing strategies for service recovery
- Implementing customer feedback systems for TESOL
- Catering for the ‘internal customer’ within TESOL operations
- Using service blueprints to improve TESOL service quality.

Finally, a program of empirical research into services management practice within TESOL, together with informed debate on the subject, would enhance and refine our comprehension of TESOL services management and would help us to choose appropriate service strategies for both commercial and non-commercial TESOL operations.

References


Crichton, J 1994. ‘Students as clients: Consequences for the reconstruction of teaching roles’. EA Journal, 12, 2: 8–14


Pennington M C 1994. ‘Advice from the front lines: What every ESL program director needs to know that they didn’t teach you in graduate school’. *Prospect*, 9, 1: 52–64


Schneider, B 1980. ‘The service organization: Climate is crucial’. *Organizational Dynamics*, Autumn: 52–65


