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Over the wall ...

Alan Maley introduces a new series in which he recommends reading for readers of ETP.

Over the wall? Wall? What wall? What are you talking about? Reasonable enough questions. So in this, the first article in my new series, let me explain what it's all about.

The background

In the 40-plus years I have been involved with English language teaching, there has been a truly extraordinary expansion in the professional training available to teachers, and a corresponding expansion of the professional literature available to support that training. Certification, whether in a university framework providing Masters (and increasingly, doctoral) programmes, or through respected assessment institutions such as Cambridge ESOL or Trinity, is now an accepted part of any serious preparation for teaching English as a foreign or second language. Alongside this, the educational publishers offer a bewildering variety of publications in the form of scholarly books and journals, ranging from highly theoretical or research-based titles to those offering more practical, classroom-oriented information and advice.

This has all been enormously positive and has led to the formation of a cadre of better-trained teachers. There is, however, a flip side. A concentration on professional qualification alone can lead to a 'technicity' view of teaching

excellence, with an undue emphasis on technical knowledge and praxis. But teaching/learning is not a science. Teachers and learners are not machines; they are people. Increasingly, we are realising that the essence of any teaching situation lies in the quality of the human relationships – what some people call 'flow' and others 'atmosphere'.

Furthermore, the professional literature we read is always in some sense convergent. The pressure on professional writers is to conform to the norms of the group or 'discourse community'. The result is that we risk reading within a set of sub-genres which closely resemble each other and where the range of topics is also circumscribed. We move in an internally self-referencing system. In short, a ghetto. And ghettos have walls. At its worst, this can lead to a form of 'Groupthink', which encourages an unquestioning belief in the rightness of what the group thinks and does. (For a brief outline of Groupthink, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groupthink>.) Yet we also need to hear varied, even dissonant and dissenting voices ... and, above all, more personal ones.

The power of reading

So much for the background to this series of articles. My contention is that reading extensively, promiscuously and associatively is good for teachers, and for personal development.

- It makes for teachers who are better informed, not just about their profession, but about the world. This makes them more interesting to be around – and students generally like their teachers to be interesting people. All Quirk and no play makes Jack a dull boy (and Jill a dull girl)! 'Reading maketh a full man', as Bacon reminds us. For our own sanity we need to be 'full'. For the sake of our students, too.
- It can help teachers to keep their own use of English fresh. The research on language learner reading, including that done by Stephen Krashen, shows overwhelmingly how extensive reading feeds into improvements in all areas of language competence. If this is true for learners, how much more true it is for teachers, who are daily exposed to restricted and error-laden English or who only read the conventional

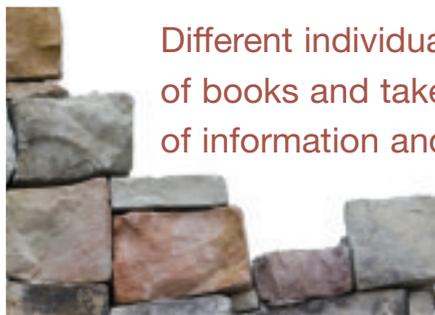
Over the wall ...



professional literature. Regular wide reading can add zest and vigour to our own use of the language, not to speak of the pleasure in the sheer joy of language it provides.

- Teachers who manifestly read widely are also models for their students. Students are often exhorted to 'read more', but students take their cue from their teachers. Why should they read if we do not? Teachers who are readers are more likely to have students who read, too.
- Furthermore, the books we read outside our narrow professional field can have an unpredictable effect on our practice within it. So much of what we learn is learnt subconsciously. John Gray puts the issue well: *'To equate what we know with what we learn through conscious awareness is a cardinal error. The life of the mind is like that of the body. If it depended on conscious awareness or control, it would fail entirely.'* This process of unconscious learning is more like osmosis than an organ transplant. Its effects spread more by infection than by direct injection. And it is highly individual. Individuals form associative networks among the books they read. Different individuals read different combinations of books and take from them different patterns of information and interpretation. This results in a kind of personal intertextuality, where the patterns form and re-form as we read more different books. As readers, we form individual, interleaved, interlocking, symbiotic structures, where we become consubstantial with the texts we have read. This gives us a rich mental yeast which we can use to interact with others, while yet retaining our personal and individual take on the texts and the world.

Yet precisely what we get from reading particular books will be both unpredictable and indirect. It is not as if we go to a particular novel or popular science text or whatever in the knowledge and expectation that we will learn from it information of direct use to us in our day-to-day teaching. The spin-off into our teaching practices may not be obvious at all. It will be subtle and indirect. Perhaps we are better off following Polonius's advice in *Hamlet* and 'by indirections find directions out'. Neither should we expect the effects to be immediate. Books (outside of study or research programmes) are not a quick fix: they operate by slow burn. The importance of what we read now will often only become apparent, if at all, months or even years later.



Different individuals read different combinations of books and take from them different patterns of information and interpretation

I am sure that most of us can recall books which have had an impact on us, even if we cannot any longer recall in detail what they said. I am thinking, in my own case, of classics such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, almost all of Dickens' works, or more recent fiction like Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* or Orwell's *1984* or *Animal Farm*. Or books of general social interest like Galbraith's *The Affluent Society*, or Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders*, or Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* or Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Or books expressing passionately controversial ideas about general education like Illich's *De-schooling Society* or Postman and Weingartner's *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. Or even books about language which illuminate it from a non-insider point of view like Bill Bryson's *Mother Tongue*. While I would certainly not pass a test on these books, I know that I would be a poorer teacher if I had not read them.

The foreground

So what will I be doing in this series of articles? I propose to share with readers of *ETp* some of my enthusiasm for books I have read. In each article I will review

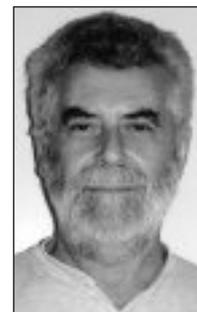
three or more titles which, for me at least, are more, or less, closely related to each other. The themes will vary from those fairly close to language teaching, such as books on the phenomenon of reading, to those with a more tenuous connection, such as books on music, for example. There will be a mixture of genres, ranging from popular science to fiction and even poetry. There may even be titles from earlier periods. A key criterion for my choice of titles will be variety.

In these reviews, the major focus will be on the intrinsic interest of the books themselves, though I will certainly draw attention to possible links to language teaching where it seems appropriate. Claire Kramsch, among others, has made the distinction between two modes of

reading: efferent and aesthetic. In efferent reading, we read to extract information from a text. In aesthetic reading, we read for the pleasure to be had from the text. Most of my readings here will be in aesthetic mode, though, like most people, I tend to switch modes from time to time. In other words, I will try to open myself to the texts rather than imposing any 'search plan' upon them.

Of course, there is no suggestion that you should read exactly what I do, or how I do, though some of the titles may attract you, too. My aim is to re-awaken your interest in this kind of discursive reading and to persuade you that it is desirable to read 'over the wall'. 

Gray, J *Straw Dogs* Granta 2002
Kramsch, C *Context and Culture in Language Teaching* OUP 1993
Krashen, S *The Power of Reading* Heinemann 2004



Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the *Oxford Resource Books for Teachers*.

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