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## **Growing at the Crossings of Disciplines: ESL as a Field Built on Intersectional Work**

### **Abstract**

English as a Second Language (ESL) is a discipline based on intersectional work that is conducted in collaboration with disciplines of psychology, cultural studies, political science, statistics, linguistics, literature, and many others. Unlike interdisciplinary fields, ESL crosses over the boundaries of disciplines only to borrow sections of knowledge and to return to the sovereign status of the ESL discipline. In this paper, I define terms “interdisciplinary” and “intersectional” and trace their applicability to the ESL through the history of the discipline’s formation. Furthermore, through the examples of Michel West’s *New Method* and the creation of the *General Service List of English Words* I show how intersectional work contributes to the development of ESL curriculum and how it differs from interdisciplinary work that could be happening in the field of English language instruction.

The discipline of English as a Second Language (ESL),<sup>1</sup> from the moment it appeared in the Middle Ages to present day, has been formed and enriched by crossing borders of other disciplines and borrowing theory and methods of other fields.<sup>2</sup> Collaboration with linguistics, literature, psychology, political science, marketing, religious studies and other disciplines has been a part of ESL work and defined its prominence in the academia. The question stands, however, whether this collaboration was and still is interdisciplinary or rather intersectional. I claim that ESL is a discipline that draws its development from intersectional work for multiple reasons. First, ESL discipline was formed as a crutch for the merchant community that needed a way to communicate with foreigners. ESL did not appear from an interdisciplinary effort in the academia, but rather served as a service vocation for international commerce. Second,

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, “English as a second language” or “ESL”, “English as a foreign language” or “EFL”, and “English language teaching” or “ELT” are used interchangeably to identify the discipline of ESL.

<sup>2</sup> “Discipline” and “field” are used interchangeably in this paper.

while ESL teachers like Michael West in the 1930s crossed the boundaries of disciplines in order to create a more useful curriculum for an ESL classroom, they stayed on the peripheries of disciplines and utilized the knowledge that intersected with their interests and needs. Third, even in collaborative projects, like the creation of the *General Service List of English Words (GSL)* for the ESL classroom, scholars brought in pieces of their disciplines that related to each other—a psychologist brought an understanding of human learning, while a statistician proposed methods of calculating word frequency, and a grammarian offered his knowledge of morphology, for instance. None of the scholars above got deeply involved in each other's disciplines, and there was no measurement by which we can assess if creating *GSL* was a fruit of one-to-one collaboration or a hybrid product of a conference. Lastly, I propose that the only collaboration that resembles interdisciplinarity is the ESL's relationship with the field of computer sciences, but it is still not quite enough to move away from intersectional work toward interdisciplinarity because in “computer-assisted language learning” (Liu 250) technology is utilized for a very specific purpose of re-creating paper-based exercises in a new medium.

The existing definitions of interdisciplinarity range from all-inclusive “simply referring to the use of more than one discipline in pursuing a particular inquiry” by Julie Thompson Klein (27); to Roberta Frank's “day-to-day interaction between persons from different disciplines...and interchange *in interactive mode* of samples, ideas, and results.” (97); and even to Dogan and Pahre's “very poor research strategy because it implies fairly thorough knowledge of two or more entire disciplines” (116). While Klein's definition is too broad, Dogan and Pahre's definition is too limiting. Frank comes closer to what I imagine true interdisciplinarity to be, but there is a fine line between day-to-day interaction among members

of the disciplines and a formation of a new combined discipline. Scholars should continue their research within the disciplines while participating in interdisciplinary projects. If there is no particular interdisciplinary inquiry in mind, constant “day-to-day interaction” can quickly melt two disciplines into a new one.

The word “interdisciplinary,” as Roberta Frank points out, in its origin contains both a contradiction and an unexpected balance. “Discipline suggests something aggressive, rigorous, requiring special talents and hard work. “Inter,” on the other hand, suggests a warm, mutual, “consultative” bond (91). This relationship of a prefix and a root is not only a matter of morphology, but a sign that applying the term “interdisciplinary” is much more problematic than, let’s say, “intersectional” (“inter”=bond and section=part). Shumway and Messer-Davidow interpret the notion of intersections as areas “where specialties from different disciplines overlap” (214). Following Dogan and Pahre’s lead, they suggest that even if disciplines interact, it doesn’t mean that the work is necessarily interdisciplinary. For instance, ESL overlaps with Communication Studies when it comes to public speaking strategies and interpersonal communication, and with Cultural Studies when it comes to dealing with culture shock. But these sub-fields of oral presentation and cultural adaptation already exist inside of each of the three fields, which means this type of collaboration requires little learning on the part of each participating scholar—each participant stays within his/her area of expertise and shares the knowledge he already possesses without having to learn something new or leaving their comfort zone. “Intersection” is also referred to as “hybridization,” which is “a process by which specialized knowledge from different fields is combined. A hybrid field results from the overlapping of two or more fringes from different disciplines” (Dogan 51). ESL is the

discipline that is very comfortable with utilizing the peripheries of disciplines for its purposes, and it was borrowing knowledge from other professions even before it became a discipline.

Historically, language teaching developed from the fields of linguistics and psychology, while its roots were also grounded in disciplines of grammar and philosophy. Louis Kelly in his book *25 Centuries of Language Teaching* points out that “the gradual crystallization of the ancient sciences into linguistics, education, philosophy, and the natural sciences took place independently of the [language] classroom, but in time deeply affected the thought and practice of language teachers.” (3) The fragmentation of disciplines does not cause any difficulty for language instruction due to its “service-discipline” nature. ESL exists comfortably in the environment where the disciplines are separated.

The fact that teaching language was a vocation before it became a discipline points to its utility and its ability to adjust among other occupations. Teaching language profession “looks to its market and takes from [other disciplines] what will sell” (Kelly 408). A.P.R. Howatt points out that teaching of modern vernacular languages “began in England toward the end of Middle Ages when French died out as the second language of the kingdom and was gradually replaced by English” (3). The success of English teachers was amplified by the necessity to provide language instruction to French merchants in all-important wool trade in the fifteenth century. As they adjusted to the demands of their consumers, language teachers drew information such as vocabulary (jargon, situational phrases), cultural specificity (who, when and what was traded), etc. from the merchants they encountered. From the very first days of its development, English language teaching took in sections of existing knowledge in order to enrich and expand its usefulness. Through its interaction with mercantile culture ESL became a part of the trade and a commercial enterprise itself. ESL teachers sold “double-

manuals"--French-English and English-French phrase books. According to Howatt, Gabriel Meurier (a Frenchman) was the first teacher of English as a foreign language because he was the first double-manual author whose name we know (since the other books were written anonymously). Meurier's double-manual was called *A Treatise for to Learn to Speak French and English* and was originally published in Antwerp in 1553. The last known copy perished in the bombing of Nuremberg during World War III, but later edition, published in Rouen in 1641, survived and the title-page stated that the book contained "a form of making letters, indentures and obligations, quittances, letters of exchange, very necessary for all Merchants that do occupy trade of merchandise" (Howatt 8). This list of content, an obvious advertisement, was included into the title page of the manual to attract buyers. This shows that ESL teachers didn't just adopt the vocabulary of merchants, but some marketing and advertisement practices as well. The market for ESL manuals grew as in 1572 the St. Bartholomew Massacre in Paris pushed Protestants from France to the countries of the reformed church, including England (Howatt 12). At this time, ESL was a not a discipline yet, so we can't talk about possibility of interdisciplinarity, but English teachers drew on vocations of French craftsmen and merchants to both develop appropriate teaching materials and to create a market for them. This shows that intersections of knowledge predated disciplines and accompanied vocations through the earliest stages of their development.

As Howatt points out, the English language teaching discipline took a very long time to acknowledge its own existence (213). English teaching remained a vocation until a new generation of teachers and writers emerged from about the middle of the seventeenth century onwards. Some were interested in "writing scholarly grammars for private study while others, particularly after the arrival of another wave of [French] refugees in the 1680s, picked up and

developed the traditions of ...teaching a practical command of the spoken language” (Howatt 30). For the next few centuries, ESL was developing along the lines of grammar study. In the nineteenth century, the role of English language teaching was reinterpreted in a sense that English was to be taught not only in Britain, but in the colonies as well. New teachers had to be trained and new students were to be taught. But the field of ESL did not become a real profession and a discipline until 1900s. According to Howatt, the first ESL journal appeared in 1945 and was called *English Language Teaching, a Periodical devoted to the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language* (217). Most of the developments in the field occurred in the past forty five years or so; since then ESL became a prominent part of universities and started to form its own departments and tenures.

Kelly argues that “in language teaching three broad aims can be distinguished; the social, the artistic (or literary), and the philosophical” (396). Within its social aim, ESL concentrates on forms of social behaviors that types of communication that English language learners encounter in their academic and professional careers. This disciplinary goal is accomplished by crossing over to the disciplines of psychology, communication studies and cultural studies. Next, “the artistic aim treats language as a vehicle for creativity, demanding both appreciation of creative activity and creative activity itself” (Kelly 396). This intent of ESL includes cooperation with scholars of literature, art, and creative writing. Lastly, “the philosophical aim demands training in analytical techniques,” and requires intersection with linguistics and philosophy (Kelly 396). Throughout its history, English as a Second Language discipline changed its focus multiple times. Kelly argues that “it is the regular changing of these aims that produced the cyclic progression which is such a noticeable feature of language-teaching development” (397). Each new era brought forth one of the three aims as the

predominant trend. For instance, in the Middle Ages language teachers focused on theorizing about grammar (*grammatica speculativa*) which stressed the philosophical aim; then during the Renaissance, the focus of language teaching landed on interpersonal communication, which addressed social aim. In the nineteenth century, grammar and philosophical aim returned and was replaced by social focus again in the modern period (Kelly 397). Today's ESL departments try to include all three aims into their goals and curricula. This implies more frequent collaboration in the intersections of the disciplines.

Constant change of disciplinary focus requires innovative language teachers to “develop as many resources as possible to meet the changing problems of the transmission of knowledge” (Kelly 408). ESL scholars dip into other disciplines in order to adjust the content and the standards of their curriculum. When educational institution changes, ESL has to change as well. Michael West, for instance, developed the New Method of teaching English by researching the educational policy of ‘filtering’ in India. Policy makers in India were “trying to ensure that the best students were ‘filtered’ through the system to end up, preferably with a British university degree” (Howatt 245). This politic created a great wastage of educational and economic resources in Indian schools because a vast majority of students from lower social classes ended up dropping out of school early in their academic careers and often in the middle of the school year. After researching this phenomenon, West created a new method of teaching English as a second language, where each year was to be a complete unit and could provide a set of English skills to the students who were filtered out of school and would not come back next year. West crossed over to the disciplines of political science, economics, sociology, and statistics in order to understand and complete his experimental project. West didn't have any formal education in any of the above fields, but his research occurred in the intersections of the

disciplines—political science and imperial policy offered him an insight on educational laws and colonial aftermath; economics explained the difficulties and the wastefulness of the educational system in India, but his research focused only on the sections of the aforementioned that dealt with education. We have no evidence whether or not professionals in those fields participated in West’s project, so, for all we know, he could have been intersecting with the other disciplines in “impersonal” matter—studying the sections of crossing through secondary sources. West entered the “fringes” of disciplines without completely immersing himself into the depth of each field (Howatt 335). Dogan and Pahre argue that such inquiry is sometimes more effective than the most interactive and involved study of multiple disciplines by multiple scholars. They argue that “by moving from the center to the periphery of a discipline, crossing its borders and penetrating the field of another, a scholar has a better chance to innovate” (1), but they claim that “narrowness is important” for the development and functioning of disciplines, and one should preserve the integrity of the discipline in order to truly innovate.

Collaborative intersectional projects are a bit more complicated than the situation where one researcher crosses over to another discipline to enrich his individual work. First, “reintegration of materials from two or more disciplines must take place on a manageable scale” (Dogan 118). Dogan and Pahre argue that attempting to collaborate with a large group of people is both hard and unproductive. An important example of intersectional group work occurred in ESL in 1934, when prominent ESL professionals gathered at a conference in New York to discuss the issues in ESL vocabulary. The outcome of the conference was ‘The Carnegie Report’ or, in full, *Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection for English as a Foreign Language* that was published in 1953 as the *General Service List of English Words (GSL)*. The

object of the conference was to compile an extensive list of most frequently used English words that would be used by visitors or new residents of English speaking countries. Each entry on the list contained:

- 1 Word frequency
- 2 Structural value (all structure words included)
- 3 Universality (words likely to cause offence locally excluded)
- 4 Subject range (no specialist items)
- 5 Definition words (for dictionary-making, etc.)
- 6 Word-building capability
- 7 Style ('colloquial' or slang words excluded) (Howatt 265)

Each entry on the list required a different perspective from a professional within a certain discipline. Sometimes, one of the seven features of the word involved inputs from multiple professionals. Sociologists and linguists had to decide which words were frequently used in daily conversations; grammarians had to examine the (sentence) structures in which the word may appear; psychologists had to evaluate the universality of the words; reading specialists determined definitions of words and word building capabilities; writers pointed to styles in which a word could be used. In other words, the work that the conference and the following committees have done required professional from different fields to contribute their expertise to creation of a part of each entry.

The *GSL* conference included scholars like E.L. Thorndike, Michael West, Harold E. Palmer, and Lawrence Faucet. E.L. Thorndike was an American scholar who was most famous for his research in animal learning behaviors, statistics, and Educational Psychology. Michael West, the same ESL teacher who conducted extensive research on Indian social classes and education to create the New Method of teaching ESL, not only participated in the conference, but edited and published the *GSL*. Harold Edward Palmer was a geologist and a fossil-collector who was also a reporter and a teacher of ESL in Belgium; he was a grammarian and a

methodologist. Lawrence Faucett was a reading specialist. As we can see, the variations of the disciplines among these scholars are not great—they all operated under Humanities and Sciences umbrella. There is nothing revolutionary about the collaboration that occurred among the conference attendees. However, a document of this scope could not have happened if an isolated group of grammarians or a set of psychologists got together and attempted to complete the same task.

In such grand projects, collaboration must happen under controlled conditions. Dogan and Pahre insist that the group of scholars simultaneously working at the intersection of disciplines should stay small, and the scholars need to start the collaboration with a clear understanding of what the process entails. Without consideration of difficulties that the intersectional work brings and without clear communication with extradisciplinary colleagues, the collaboration is in danger of becoming “a tower of Babel.” (Dogan 118) Thankfully, the *GSL* collaboration didn’t live through that type of disaster. Possibly, aforementioned closeness of disciplines contributed to the better communication process and respect among the participants. It is also possible that, since the subject of the conference was language, the extradisciplinary communication was more successful than it could have been on another subject.

The problem arises, however, when we start trying to define this project as either “interdisciplinary” or “intersectional.” Klein would definitely call this project “interdisciplinary” because it produced “new knowledge” and created a glimpse of “unity of science[s]” (38). Dogan and Pahre, on the other hand, would resist the term “interdisciplinary” and claim that, if we take that step, we would have to assume that Palmer, for instance, put in a significant effort to learn a whole discipline of educational psychology, while Thorndike

studied grammar and curriculum development in detail in order to participate in this project. In this case, it is wise to apply Dogan and Pahre's term of "intersection" rather than "interdisciplinarity," but for a different reason than they have presented in *Creative Marginality*. In my mind, if *GSL* project is purely an interdisciplinary work, it would mean that each scholar would offer some kind of input (a paper, a theory, or a presentation) from their intra-disciplinary research to contribute to the conference's shared pool of knowledge. Thorndike, for instance, would give a talk on animal learning, West on social classes' impact on education, Palmer on grammar, and so on. That way, through a truly interdisciplinary interaction, all of the scholars would walk away with a new understanding of their disciplines in the light of the newly acquired knowledge. As Klüver says in "The Pavillion," when he is describing E.A.T.'s interdisciplinary project in Japan, "engineers [would want] to be artists, ...accountants [would want] to be engineers," etc. (224). To me, the re-evaluation of interests and new inspirations are necessary for interdisciplinarity. However, this shift did not happen in the *GSL* project. The scholars came together with a mutual goal of creating a list of most used English words, which meant that somewhere within their separate disciplines a section of knowledge on language was contained. They simply crossed each other's paths at the intersection of vocabulary development and offered their expertise that pertained only to the narrow section of vocabulary and language use. Each participant, in his won turn did just that—shared what they already knew.

Intersectional work requires as much determination and effort of each scholar as interdisciplinary work, but its span is different. Intersections are based on narrow notions. Concepts are the building blocks of disciplines and they are the material which gets exchanged in intersectional/hybrid work (Dogan 123). Sometimes intersection is an easier way of

collaboration, even though it exists only on the borders of disciplines. “Every field harbors within it greater differences than those which divide it, on the average, from neighboring fields.” (Riesman qtd. in Dogan 84) It is easier to collaborate with someone who doesn’t participate in the race for tenure and promotion. An ESL professional who is interested in cultural shock will probably find more in common with a cultural studies professor who is interested in culture-specific language than with a grammarian who is working on the use of plurals, even though the two ESL professors work within the same discipline. Subfields are sometimes “more closely linked to subfields across departmental boundaries rather than within them.” (Dogan 84)

Perhaps, the subfields in ESL are so easily matched with other disciplines because the ESL rarely ventures off to find a heavily scientific or technical field that would struggle to become compatible with its goals and curriculum. The most technical field ESL had collaborated with is computer sciences. In this process ESL lessons and exercises had moved on to a different medium. According to Min Liu, the computer-assisted ESL learning in the 1990s was limited to “drill-and-practice exercises” on the computer screen (250), which would mean that the same textual foundation was transferred to a different platform, but didn’t utilize the capabilities of the medium. Liu stresses the current shift “from computer technology to its application” (252), would require ESL to make compromises and be more open to utilizing medium capabilities. The utopian goal for ESL-computer science collaboration is to create an environment in which through computers the English language learners could increase their self-esteem, increase “vocational preparedness, language proficiency and overall academic skills” (Liu 252). But this collaboration in intersections is just now starting to emerge. A lot of

the ESL computer-based tools are still a pure representation of what a student would be doing on paper.

In conclusion, though definitions of interdisciplinarity and intersections differ from scholar to scholar, I insist that ESL is not based on interdisciplinary work. The history of ESL as well as major projects that have established the discipline of English language instruction are based on intersectional collaboration. The disciplines participating in this process, such as political science, cultural studies, linguistics, etc. are closely related and naturally contain the crossings of subjects. Interdisciplinarity requires something more than simply exchanging ideas on one topic with colleagues from another department. It requires mutual learning and new types of innovation. Intersectional work is much less threatening to the sovereignty of disciplines, and ESL successfully utilizes the separation as well as crossing of the disciplines in building its curriculum.

### **Old Abstract**

#### Interdisciplinary or Intersectional?: Configuration of the Discipline of English as a Second Language

This paper explores possible classifications of ESL as a field based on its interdisciplinary and/or intersectional efforts. By considering the history of ESL and current trends in ESL curriculum development, the paper demonstrates that a more accurate definition of English as a Second Language is that on an intersectional nature. While ESL frequently employs professionals from various fields to aid in building its curriculum, the discipline as a whole is formed by borrowing certain segments of knowledge from other fields rather than by completing undeniably interdisciplinary projects.

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