

BRIDGING THE GAP  
BETWEEN ACAPULCO AND LOS MOCHIS

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Hang-gliding is great fun as long as you land correctly. In order to learn the sport well you study the theory; you watch other people do it; you may even take lessons; finally it's your turn and you try it. Off you go, soaring around, seeing things from up above, enjoying it. But it all comes down to the landing. If you don't land correctly, you may never glide again. If you do land correctly, you are ready and eager for more.

Attending a MEXTESOL convention is something like hang-gliding. As you attend workshops, plenaries, papers, demonstrations, etc., you learn new theories or new methodologies. Hopefully, you understand how they work. You may even get to see them in action or participate in their operation. The one thing remaining is for you to try them out with your students. That's like the hang-glider landing.

Returning to your classroom, you try these new ideas out. You modify them to fit your teaching situation. If they work, you become an advocate of those ideas and share them with fellow teachers. Or you may discover that some of the ideas you heard don't work, at least not in your teaching situation, and you share that discovery with other teachers.

So, we have a give-and-take process, one which we may divide into two parts: presented ideas and classroom reality. This is not to say that new ideas are divorced from the classroom setting or that they don't come from actual teaching experience. It is simply to say that often there is a gap between good ideas and dis-

coveries and clear understanding of those ideas and discoveries.

For example, when you go back to your teaching situation, some of you will be involved in teacher training sessions at your schools. Others will speak or give workshops at local or national TESOL conventions. Some of your audiences will have a high level of preparation and experience in TESOL. Other audiences may be just a step above the proficiency level of their students in English, but nevertheless, eager to do their job well. As you explain your ideas, you have the opportunity to continue this process of exchanging ideas.

The temptation is always present in being the bearer of good news, of wonderful new ideas, to use what may be called the "bumph factor", that is, to play the expert, couching what you want to say in awesome terms and formidable language. An illustration of this "bumph factor" in action is the reply of the Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War when asked if a build-up in American military involvement in Vietnam in fact constituted escalation. He replied, "Not at all. It is merely an incremental adjustment to meet a new stimulus level."<sup>1</sup> Another example is when the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare titled a study to determine why children fall off bicycles and tricycles "The Evaluation and Parameterization of Stability and Safety Performance Characteristics of Two- and Three-Wheeled Vehicular Toys for Riding."<sup>2</sup>

Resist this temptation to employ the bumph factor. Remember the teachers in your audience, keeping in mind your own experiences as a victim of this factor. If you communicate clearly, your audience will understand what you're saying and how it applies to their classrooms. They will be eager to try your ideas out, and their students will benefit. Ideas which are not clearly communicated will be useless to your audience.

How can this potential fogginess between ideas and classroom be reduced. First, if you attend a workshop or plenary talk and you feel yourself going under, ask the speaker to clarify what he or she means. Choose a key question or specific point to be clarified

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1. The Way of Language, Fred West, p. 153, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., New York.

2. *Ibid.*, p.154.

for you. Don't give up. If the ideas being presented seem good to you, they're worth understanding well. Besides, others in the audience may be in the same fog, and will appreciate your questions.

Second, if you are the presenter of a workshop or lecture at a local or national MEXTESOL meeting, you can use the following questions as a checklist for clarity:

1. What is the main point I'm driving at? Is it theory, or is it methodology?
2. What audience is this talk or workshop designed for? Primary teachers? Secondary teachers? Teacher trainers?
3. What level are the people in my audience at in terms of their proficiency in English and their background and education in TESOL?
4. What new terms or phrases am I using? Or what familiar terms am I using in a new way?
5. How can I define these terms or phrases most clearly?
6. Can I illustrate them in some way or use examples?
7. Can I show how my ideas work? Given the setting of the talk or workshop, can I model them with my audience or have the audience participate?

In 1931 a multinational expedition left Beirut, Lebanon, bound for Peking, China. At a river ford in Afghanistan the members of the expedition struggled for three days, often up to their chins in water, trying to get a seven-ton radio car across the river. Finally, the Afghan riverman lost all patience, and in a rage screamed, "May my spit cover your faces!"

"What does he say?" asked the French mechanic.

The translator replied, "That the truck is heavier than you said."<sup>3</sup>

The goal of this profession is for our students to learn to communicate well in English and to learn to do that as quickly as possible. We can help in that process by taking new ideas back to our respective schools and local MEXTESOL chapters and explaining them clearly to our colleagues there.

Unlike the translator at that river crossing in Afghanistan, we need to communicate clearly.

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3. Images of the World, p. 106, National Geographic Society, Washington D. C.