

A Map of ELT: Plenary by Mark Hancock

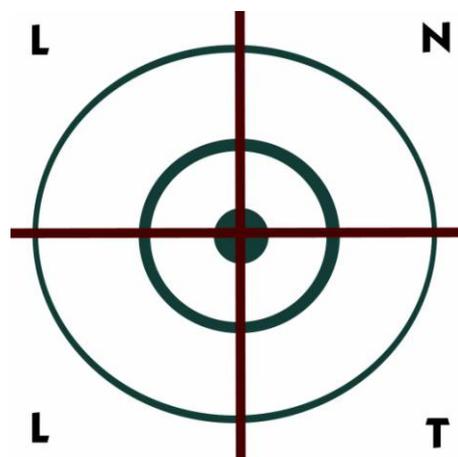
The idea of a Map of ELT was born on a train to Budapest. I was with Annie McDonald returning from a conference, and we were trying to make sense of the information overload that we'd just experienced. So many concepts, and so little relationship between them. Things like CLIL and the lexical approach, or Dogme and English as a lingua franca: they seemed as incompatible as oil and water. How did they fit together? Then I found something interesting in the paper: it was a map of modern art, put together by BBC art critic, Will Gomerz. I found that aspects of modern art I hadn't understood made more sense to me now. Annie and I decided that perhaps this is what was needed for ELT and we set about drafting the map there and then.

There is a Chinese proverb which says, 'If you don't climb the mountain, you can't see the plain'. If the world of ELT is the plain, then to see it properly, we would need to climb a mountain - or perhaps fly! After all, what we want was a bird's-eye view of the territory. But given that this territory is conceptual, not real, this all has to happen in our minds. Where to begin?



If you take a look at a world map from Roman times, you will see that the landmass - Europe, Asia and Africa, is roughly circular, and right at the centre is the Roman Empire. This is a very egocentric map, but then, many are. And egocentricity has become a feature of our map of ELT too, but in our case, the centre of the map is an idealized newly qualified English teacher. This is not to be confused with the pejorative idea of being 'teacher-centred', it merely states that this is the world of ELT as seen by a teacher.

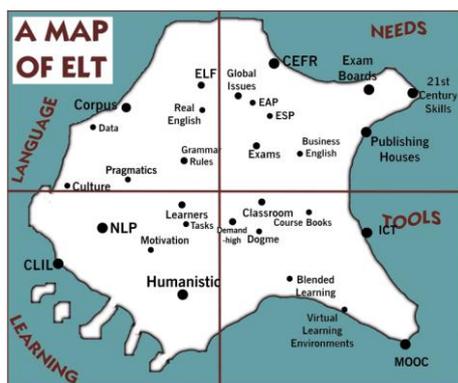
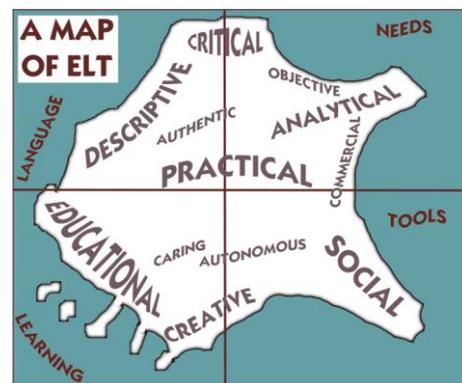
So now our map has a dimension of centre-periphery, where the closer to the centre is nearer to the concerns of a newly qualified teacher, and closer to the edge is further remote from those practical concerns. Next, we segment the map into quarters. We put a vertical line through the centre of the map dividing it into east and west, and a horizontal line dividing it into north and south. The North West (NW) is the territory of the target language and linguistics. The North East (NE) is the territory of the skills that need to be acquired. The South West (SW) is the territory of learning and psychology, and the South East (SE) is the territory of the tools and means which are available to the teacher.





From their vantage point in the centre of the map, the beginning teachers will perhaps see one hill in each direction; in the NW, a hill which is the simple pedagogic grammar - a sequence of tenses from simple to complex; in the NE, a hill which are the skills they have to teach - not least of which being getting them through the next exam; in the SW, they see their classroom full of learners; in the SE, the room, the books, the board and whatever technology is available.

Before going on to explore more detail the four corners of the map, let us first take a look at the map as a whole. The map has two layers of labelling. On the first layer, we see words in a large grey font printed at various different angles. These are the 'temperament labels'. For example, near the centre is 'Practical', which represents a key idea for inhabitants of this region - people who are most concerned with practical classroom common sense. Some of the other temperament labels include, for example, 'Descriptive' - where the inhabitants are most concerned to accurately describe the target language; 'Analytical' - where the inhabitants want to analyse students needs as closely as possible; 'Creative' - where the people believe creativity is key to life-long learning, and 'Social' - where the locals like to learn by being connected up together, via the social media, for example.



The second layer of labelling shows points on the map together with labels in a smaller black font. These represent key concepts and ideas in contemporary ELT - although by no means all of them! Notice that these represent key concerns in ELT today - this map is a snapshot of the territory now, not a history. So, time to explore the corners in a bit more detail.

There is a Finnish proverb which says, 'The more you walk, the more hills you see'. As our new teachers walk to the top of each of the hills described above, they discover there are more hills beyond, which they may not even have imagined to exist. For example, on reaching the hill of pedagogic grammar, they then see that grammar is actually description rather than prescription, and that there are various alternative models of it. They see the hill of corpus linguistics and come across ideas like the lexical approach. They see that there are other aspects of language they'd never thought of before, such as discourse and pragmatics. All of these things are in the NW.

In the NE, our teachers come across the idea that different students have different needs, and some of these needs might be quite specialist - for example, English for academic purposes, English for special purposes or business English. They will find more and more detailed descriptions of the target skills which students need to acquire, as described in the Common European Framework of Reference can do. They will inevitably experience the washback from the big exam boards and the requirements of their local ministries of education, and the resultant syllabuses in coursebooks.

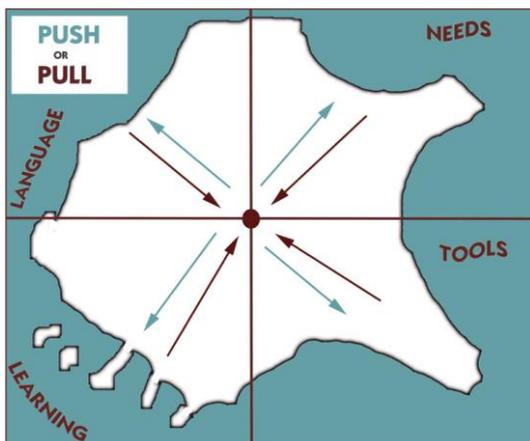
In the far north, our new teachers will come across ideas which are critical of the mainstream 'truths' about how the target language is to be described and what counts as being a competent user of it. They will come across the idea of English as a Lingua Franca - and not the 'property' of a 'native-speaker'.

In the SW, our new teachers will encounter the idea of student-centredness, different learning styles, motivation and creativity. They will find people who propose classrooms which are less narrowly focussed on just teaching language and instead, which seek more complete educational purposes - for example Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

In the SE, our new teachers will soon find that there are many other means to use in the classroom than just a coursebook. And of these, perhaps the most salient is Information and Communications Technology (ICT). First of all, they will see how these tools can be used in their classrooms to add variety and motivation. Then they will discover that their classroom is actually a virtual space, and as much work may be done outside the physical walls as within them. If they go far enough in this direction, they might even find that the physical classroom and teacher disappear altogether, to be replaced by Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC)! Meanwhile, our teachers will also discover the idea that actually, materials and tools are not necessary after all - that much more important is the learning that emerges from interaction in class.



Now let's consider the uses of the map. First of all, it serves the purpose of **orientation**. When you hear about a new idea at a conference, on the web or wherever, you can try to locate it on the map, and in the process, this forces you to consider what the main thrust of the idea is, and what are the neighbouring concepts. Take for example the idea of '21st Century Skills'. This is a label given to a package of skills taken to be newly significant in this new century, ranging from life and career skills, learning skills and ICT skills. I have located this in the NE because the main thrust of the idea is a redefinition of target needs or competences. I have located it remote from the centre because it extends quite a long way beyond the basic teach-the-language brief that is the main concern of the newly qualified English teacher.



This brings us on to a second purpose of the map - **comparison** of competing ideas in ELT. An interesting pattern here are the two opposing forces of 'pushing out' and 'pulling back'. The idea of '21st Century Skills' is a good example of pushing out. It is an idea from beyond the territorial limits of ELT, which some ELT thinkers have imported into our profession, perhaps with the idea of enriching it. However, in pushing out from the centre, an idea runs the risk of losing touch with the practical purpose at the

centre - language teaching. This gives rise to the reaction force of pulling back. Again, with reference to '21st Century Skills', the pull back idea can be expressed like this: 'Wait a moment - all this talk of life and career skills etcetera is all very nice, but it's beyond our remit - we are here to teach language!'.

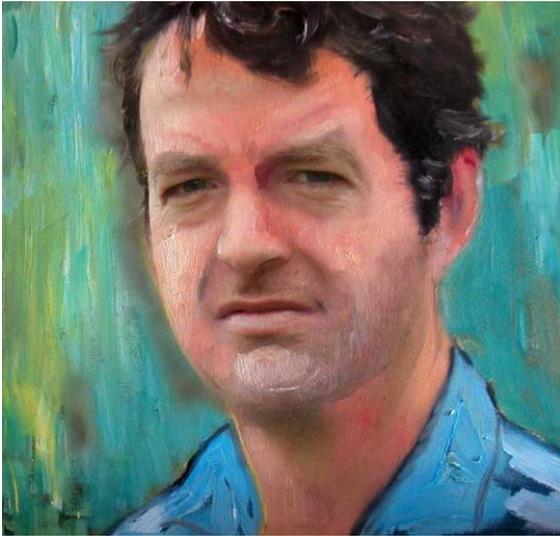
And finally, we turn to the third, and perhaps most important purpose of the map - **balance**. A map such as this serves to constantly remind us of the bigger picture, lest our enthusiasms and specialist interests should give us tunnel vision. This image illustrates what such a tunnel vision might look like →

There is a proverb in Liberia which says, 'You can't tie a bundle with one hand'. It's a very graphic image. You need at least two hands for that job. And for English teaching, four - one for each corner of the map. A

language teacher needs knowledge of the language (NW), understanding of needs (NE), an understanding of how people learn (SW) and an ability to coordinate the tools and means available (SE). Just having one 'hand' is not enough. For instance, there is a lot of excitement at ELT conferences these days about technological tools, and very often the discussion proceeds with no reference at all to questions of language, syllabus or learning psychology. This is very one-handed. No matter how powerful the new tools are, they don't absolve us from considering the other three corners of the map as well.



The proverbs in this article were sourced from:
Crystal, D (2006) 'As they say in Zanzibar' HarperCollins, London



Mark Hancock graduated in geography and philosophy in 1984. Since then, he has done an MA in Teaching English, and he has been an English teacher on three continents. Since the early 1990s, he has also been an ELT materials writer. His first book was Pronunciation Games (CUP 1995). He co-founded, with Annie McDonald, the ELT resource website hancockmcdonald.com