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Service, Satisfaction, and Climate: Perspectives on Management in English Language Teaching

John Walker

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INNOVATION AND LEADERSHIP IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING VOLUME 2

SERVICE, SATISFACTION, AND CLIMATE: PERSPECTIVES ON MANAGEMENT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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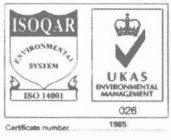

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

SERVICE, SATISFACTION, AND CLIMATE: PERSPECTIVES ON MANAGEMENT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

PREFACE

This book fills the gap that exists between the world of English language teaching (ELT) and the world of commerce. ELT is a major worldwide service industry with a dual nature, and a unique set of issues and challenges. It is an educational service, yet functions almost entirely within a commercial context. It employs professional, specialist teachers. Its students are clients who pay for the service rendered. It has a strong cross-cultural dimension. Perhaps the dual nature of English language teaching centers (ELTCs), inhabiting as they do the middle ground between business enterprise and educational institution, is a major reason for the fact that so few ELT management research studies can be found in the literature, especially studies reporting empirical research, and more particularly, studies that acknowledge the status of ELT as a service. This book does both of these things.

The journey to this point has been long and eventful. As a beginning teacher with a degree and a fresh diploma in ELT, I cut my teeth in an overseas development role in the newly independent East Africa of the 1960s. As many English language teachers do, I subsequently took up contracts in a range of ELT contexts around the world, including high schools, military education, industry training, and the tertiary sector. On the way, I "progressed through the ranks" and morphed—as many in this field do—from teacher to manager. Like most in my position, faced with managing programs, students, and other teachers, I did my job with no formal management qualifications and did my learning primarily on the job. It was only when I studied management on a formal basis, gaining a second Masters degree and a PhD along the way, that I was able to grasp how management theory—and especially services management theory—could be practically applied to the world I had belonged to for several decades. When I completed my (probably) final metamorphosis to management academic in a New Zealand business school, I was able to enjoy the luxury not only of time, but also of encouragement to conduct research into ELT from a management perspective. It is out of these research activities that this book has evolved.

Services management is still something of an emergent discipline. This is perhaps one reason why the major theme of this book—that ELTCs are

service operations—has, so far, been largely overlooked by most of the small band of writers and researchers working in the area of ELT management. A major purpose of this text is to remedy this omission by uncovering some of what has hitherto been unknown; it is not the intention to develop new theories or models of services management. Instead, existing services theory is applied to ELT service operations in order to illuminate what is taking place "on the ground" and "at the front line" in ELTCs. In order to set the scene, the extensive services literature is drawn on to demonstrate that ELT fits comfortably within conventional service parameters and that the work of English language teachers corresponds to most of the fundamentals expected of service providers. Two constructs fundamental to services management—customer satisfaction and service climate—are examined with reference to the ELT context.

In the succeeding chapters, two major empirical research projects are described which investigated these constructs in ELTCs in New Zealand. The work of ELT managers in the tertiary sector is also examined. The findings from these studies offer novel insights on the services context of ELT from the perspective of students, teachers, administrative staff, and managers. Like other areas of management, services management encompasses models, tools, and frameworks that can be applied to assist services managers in dealing with practical problems and issues. A number of these are outlined, together with suggestions for their application in an ELT context. Given the dearth of published research in the area of ELT management, it is timely to include a chapter aimed at encouraging those wishing to become involved in ELT management research and offering suggestions for potential areas of research interest. Finally, implications are drawn for ELT managers.

This book is the first of its kind and so should be of value as a resource for the ELT field and also to a number of specific audiences. It is likely to be of interest not only to ELT program managers, directors of studies, and business owners, but also to teachers and administrators interested in gaining an insight into services aspects of ELT, as well as graduate students studying ELT management as part of a major in education or linguistics. It may find other audiences as well in the wider fields of language teaching and education more generally.

It was an honor to be asked by Professor Martha Pennington, a pioneer of ELT management research, to contribute to the new Emerald series on Innovation and Leadership in English Language Teaching. As one of the first to research and publish in the area of what is now known as ELT management, Martha has been a major inspiration to the research described

here. She is a valued colleague, without whose expert guidance this book would not have come to fruition. I would also like to acknowledge the many managers, business owners, senior teachers, administrators, and teachers in New Zealand ELTCs, not to mention the students themselves, without whose help and cooperation the research studies described here would not have been possible. Thanks also go to my partner of many years, Dr Ute Walker, upon whom I can always call for specialist knowledge, wisdom, advice, and encouragement.

John Walker

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CHAPTER ONE

ELT AS A SERVICE[☆]

INTRODUCTION

Set up as a response to global demand for English language proficiency, English language teaching centers (ELTCs) are the mainstay of a major global education industry that is particularly well established in "inner circle" countries (Edwards, 2004) such as Britain, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. ELTCs are English language teaching (ELT) providers that offer courses to paying, non-native speaker students, and are staffed by teachers with specialist qualifications in English as a second language (ESL). Typically, ELTCs are either privately owned companies or entities subsumed within colleges, faculties, or schools of universities or polytechnics. Since ELTCs are set up to make a profit for their owners, they are a good example of the fusion of the educational and the commercial imperatives. The application of business style management and marketing models to the administration of educational programs (Barlow, 1994; Greenwood & Gaunt, 1994) has been a discernible trend in recent times. The fact that general management and administrative theory is effectively transferable to an educational setting has gained wider acceptance in ELT circles (Savage, 1996). This is evident from, for example, the existence of an International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) ELT Management Special Interest Group (SIG) and newsletter, the publication of a number of textbooks on ELT management (e.g., Impey & Underhill, 1994; Pennington, 1991; White, Hockley, van der Horst Jansen, & Laughner, 2008), the gradual appearance of articles in ELT journals written from a management or quasi-management perspective, some of which report empirical research (e.g., Bordia, Wales, Pittam, & Gallois, 2006; Crichton, 1994; Stoller & Christison, 1994; Waites & Wild, 1992), as well as universities offering tertiary qualifications in ELT management.

[☆]Adapted from Walker, J. (2000a). ESOL teachers as service providers. *Prospect, 15*(1), 23–33 and Walker, J. (1998). TESOL as a service. *EA Journal, 16*(2), 30–39.

An occasional feature of such literature is allusion to the "services" offered by ELTCs (e.g., Impey & Underhill, 1994; Strange & Rossner, 1993; White, Martin, Stimson & Hodge, 1991). A number of writers have also referred either directly (e.g., de Waal, 1994; Godfrey, 1994; Hirons, 1994; Savage, 1996) or indirectly (Pickering, 1994) to ELT as a service. The distinction between *services* and *a service* is significant. ELT operations might offer, as part of the overall package, "services" such as courtesy transport, homestay placement, or access to leisure activities, which would normally be the responsibility of administrative or ancillary staff. Increasingly, however, it is accepted that English language teachers deal with students who are, in effect, customers (Crichton, 1994) or clients and that the teaching-learning component of an ELT operation should also be regarded as part of the overall service offering. As Barlow (1994) writes, all the staff of ELTCs should be aware "that they have a dual role of providing a service to the public, and whilst providing that service, to make [the ELT provider] commercially viable" (p. 15). The fact is, rather than merely "providing services," ELT organizations provide *a service*. That is, they are *service operations* whose purpose is to create an integrated learning experience for paying students. As such, everyone in the ELT organization is a service provider, whether manager, faculty, or administrative staff.

SERVICE ATTRIBUTES AND ELT

According to the eminent Swedish services researcher, Gummesson (1987, p. 22), services are "... something that can be bought and sold, but which you cannot drop on your foot." Tongue-in-cheek definitions apart, the task of defining the exact nature of a service is fraught with difficulty and some lack of consensus in the literature, perhaps partly as a result of the fact that the notion of a service as a separate entity within the fields of marketing and management is barely three decades old. There appear to be about as many definitions, ranging from the simple to the complex, as there are services management and marketing experts, for instance:

Zeithaml and Bitner (1996):
Services are deeds, processes and performances (p. 5).

Vargo and Lusch (2004):
The application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself (p. 2).

Kotler (1988):

> ... any activity or benefit that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything. Its production may or may not be tied to a physical product (p. 477).

Grönroos (2007):

> A service is a process consisting of a series of more or less intangible activities that normally, but not necessarily always, take place in interactions between the customer and service employees and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which are provided as solutions to customer problems (p. 52).

Grönroos' struggle to shoehorn the essence of a service into one sentence puts the problem into perspective. Given the disparity between offerings, it is difficult to discern one definitional theme that might apply to ELT as a service. However, already from these four sample definitions, it is possible to glean some of the key terms which are frequently used by researchers to describe services, for instance, *intangible*, *process*, *performance*, *interaction*. To what extent do such key terms apply to ELT service operations? Four terms that have been consistently used in an attempt to identify the generic features of a service, within a context of differentiation from physical products, are the four so-called IHIP attributes (Lovelock & Gummesson, 2004; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985), namely *intangibility*, *heterogeneity*, *inseparability*—sometimes referred to as *simultaneity* (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2004)—and *perishability*. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, these characteristics functioned as something approaching "the four pillars of service." However, with the changing nature of business, and in particular the advent of information technology, "the four pillars" have come in for increasing criticism, and are perceived as being flawed (e.g., Lovelock & Gummesson, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004) despite the fact that some prominent researchers still regard them as of some, albeit limited, usefulness (Edvardsson, Gustafsson, & Roos, 2005). To what extent can these four classic characteristics be applied to ELT service operations, and what other service characteristics can be ascribed to them?

Intangibility

More than any other, intangibility is the characteristic that was developed to differentiate the sale and production of services from the sale and production of goods: when you purchase a camera, you end up with a tangible good; when you purchase a consultation with a doctor, you do not. However, there are obvious weaknesses here. Nowadays, many types of

service (e.g., retail services, automobile repair, hospitality, air travel) are associated in some way with a tangible outcome or "facilitating goods" for the customer (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2004, p. 20) as part of the service purchase, that is, goods exchange ownership during the service process. Even a visit to the doctor might end with (very tangible) medication included in the bill. Undeniably, there are services that may be purely intangible, for instance, types of entertainment or sport. But the fact remains that there are so many exceptions that it is difficult to assign with confidence the descriptor *intangible* to services across the board. To what extent, then, can we say that ELT service is intangible? What is perhaps relevant for ELT is that regardless of the degree of involvement of tangible goods, the fact remains that *the act of performing the service* is in itself an intangible. In an ELT operation, performing the service consists principally of teaching, that is, an intangible process aimed at the intellect (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 1994) of the ESL student. In addition, many of the service interactions outside the classroom that students become involved in are undoubtedly intangible—for instance, obtaining information from the receptionist, consulting a teacher on career plans, or interacting with the host family. ELT providers may "tangibilize" (McLaughlin & Coffey, 1990) their service provision, for instance, by including learning materials, stationery, or ancillary promotional items such as T-shirts and souvenirs in the price of the service package. However, the core teaching and learning activities, as well as a range of other provider-student interactions, remain intangible. Thus, we can probably conclude that while ELT service has some tangible elements, intangibility characterizes much, or even, most of what takes place. Also, the acknowledgment of such intangibility is valuable for both ELT researchers and managers, as it points to a potential difficulty students may have in assessing the quality of the service provided because of a lack of reference points. As a result, tangible aspects of the ELT service such as office and classroom decor, the facilities in the student lounge or computer lab, or the level of hygiene in the restrooms may become important proxy measures for service quality in the minds of students (Bitner, 1990, 1992; Schneider & Bowen, 1995).

Heterogeneity

Heterogeneity in service operations refers to a potential degree of variability in terms of the quality of the service provided compared to the level of standardization that is possible with a manufactured product. This is largely

a consequence of the fact that the service provision is viewed as a social interaction, the success of which is partly a function of the knowledge, skills, personal attributes, and degree of involvement of the people involved, both the customers and providers (Wright, 1995). All other things being equal, the interactions between two separate customers with internet problems and two separate support staff in an ISP call center, for instance, might reach rather different outcomes. However, it has been pointed out (e.g., Gummesson, 2000; Vargo & Lusch, 2004) that *homogeneity* is indeed a feature of many service types, for instance, banking services such as those involving the use of ATMs, information provided on websites, and some medical procedures. These are often the result of efforts to achieve a degree of standardization, efficiency, and effectiveness associated with quality assurance actions. Elements of higher (tertiary) education may even be homogeneous, since the same lecture could be delivered to hundreds of university students (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

The question is, then, to what extent is the ELT service *heterogeneous*? ELT providers may achieve levels of homogeneity in areas such as publicity materials, website design and content, and even standardized administrative techniques for dealing with students (through, e.g., the use of service scripts). They may even strive for homogeneity in the classroom service provision, for instance, through the use of one set of learning goals or one standard textbook or set of learning materials for a specific level of student proficiency. However, as further discussed below, the ESL student is the co-producer of the ESL service. According to Finocchiaro (1989), "individual learners restructure, in their own way, the material we present—based on past experiences in acquiring knowledge and solving problems" (pp. 17–18), while factors such as age, aptitude, ability, aspirations and needs, first language, and previous language learning experience are crucial factors in a student's success with a particular ELT program. Harmer (1991) pointed out that while a textbook may be written for a general audience, each class is unique and students need to be treated individually. Therefore, even at identical levels of proficiency, with a standardized curriculum, techniques, and learning materials, individual learner characteristics will inevitably preclude the possibility of each student receiving an identical service. Furthermore, even within one institution, an ESL student is unlikely to remain with one teacher for the entire period of study, particularly if the student progresses through proficiency levels or takes different types of course. Variations in individual teacher performance, experience, skill level, dedication, personal and professional attributes, and other personal qualities are likely to introduce a further element of heterogeneity into the

teaching-learning context. In terms of ancillary services such as homestay, homogeneity of service delivery would be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve—despite the use of training, information sessions, and written guidelines for homestay families. In fact, in a world where manufacturers are now using flexible manufacturing processes to customize products, heterogeneity might actually be an advantage that service managers should capitalize on (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Thus, the inherent heterogeneity of ELT service implies a potential level of customization and personal service that ESL students might welcome.

Inseparability or Simultaneity

Traditional wisdom taught that because manufacturing takes place largely away from the presence of the customer, production and consumption are separated; services, on the other hand, can be produced and consumed only when the service provider and the service customer interact simultaneously (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 1994) and are therefore referred to as *inseparable*. Thus, carrying out a transaction in the bank or visiting an optician involves both the provider and recipient of the service being present at the same time. Critics (e.g., Lovelock, 2000) have pointed out that not only are some goods produced with the involvement of the customer (e.g., bespoke tailoring or customized home building), some services are produced separately from the customer (e.g., information on websites or movie production). It may be that the issue of whether a service is inseparable or not hinges, for particular service types, on definitions of *production* and *consumption*. In terms of ELT service, much the same circumstances apply as for heterogeneity. Some aspects of the service might be produced away from the student, for instance, materials for a self-access or learning center, written instructions for students on practical aspects of living in a new culture, or the cleaning of restrooms. However, because the ESL student is a co-producer, the core aspect of the ELT service, classroom learning, is inseparable. Controversies over incidental language acquisition versus conscious learning aside (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985), the ELT classroom is intended as a venue for activities which ideally will lay the foundations of learning through, for example, habit-formation. Such activities are facilitated by the teacher in conjunction with the students, that is, the service is produced and consumed simultaneously, even though learning may continue to occur after the event. Student interactions with administrative staff and activities with a homestay family, are, likewise, inevitably