

An Appraisal of Modern Currents in ELT: Ten Articles

by Charles Lowe

‘Before enlightenment, carry water, chop wood.

After enlightenment, carry water, chop wood’

Gautama Siddhartha (the Buddha), c500BC

1. The Prologue

Abstract

In these articles, I hope that there is something for everyone. With them, I am trying to show, from my perspective of nearly three decades in the language education field, in various capacities, that there is a certain quality to the place that teachers have within this field which uniquely positions them to understand the language learning process better than anyone else. In this first article, I outline my rationale and my background assumptions, and I briefly summarise the articles in the rest of the series.

Introduction

First a little about myself. I have been in the ELT business, variously as teacher, trainer, academic, and school principal, for 28 years. I offer this series of ten articles as a collection of reflections and insights formed over those years, which have especially sharpened in the last five. Most of these years have been spent teaching in the classroom and teacher training, but I did also spend seven years running two major language and training institutes, and I spent a year teaching at the London University Institute of Education ESOL Department, where I meanwhile began a PhD. I was lucky enough to be the person charged with designing and setting up the first distance teacher training course in the world, the UCLES Distance DTEFLA, which ran from 1980 – 2000 and has now been replaced by the Distance DELTA. I have been privileged to work at close quarters with some of the greats of ELT - Liz and John Soars, Martin Parrott, Ruth Gairns and Stuart Redman, Michael Swan and Catherine Walter, Peter Moor and Sarah Cunningham, Henry Widdowson, Peter Skehan, Rob Batstone, Scott Thornbury and Paul Emmerson – from all of them I have gained immensely and to all of them I owe a debt of gratitude. For many years now I have been teaching executives and professionals – the most interesting students I have taught, and an excellent crucible for testing new ideas.

What I am going to say in this series of articles will, I hope, shed new light on a number of modern developments in language teaching. Firstly, I want to argue, from the perspective of Perspective, that we teachers have certain professional obligations in regard to new ideas about language teaching. Secondly, I want to apply critical judgement to some of those ideas in the light of both an academic background and a long career in the classroom. Thirdly, I want to introduce some new and practical concepts of my own.

Above all, if there is one message in this series, it is that the only things that ultimately matter in the classroom are: a pragmatic, sensible, down-to-earth practicality and a good intuition about the internal workings of your students' minds – an ability to ask (and answer) the question: “What is really going on here?” These two attributes, practicality and intuition, have stood, and will continue to stand, the tests of time and of our post-modern tendency towards dissatisfaction, infinite newness, and the desire to sweep away the past with new solutions.

On a distant MA course I had the satisfaction of studying among other things, Chomsky's transformational grammar, Halliday's functional grammar, the work of Grice on communicative relevance, the sociolinguistics of pragmatics, the then-new theories of connectionism, and, most fascinating of all, the work of Bollinger, Pawley, Syder, Nattinger, and Lewis, on the subject of prefabricated language chunks, or 'pre-fabs'. I later used these ideas in my nascent PhD, and the thesis was to be called 'Learning How to Mean in L2', in which I loosely followed Halliday's study of his baby son's assimilation of intonation to analyse the incoming streams of sound into 'communicative chunks' – stretches of sound that started long and got gradually broken up into smaller units, as the child's natural heuristic (sense-making) drive made sense of things, and a grammar emerged. My idea was to utilise a similar model – which I called 'interlanguage pragmatics' – to follow and describe the growing language of five adult L2 learners of English. I never finished that study. But I did get a taste for the notions so prevalent in today's literature on language learning, about grammaticisation, and about lexical views of language.

It can hardly be doubted now that L1 learners, children that is, engage some kind of in-built predisposition to 'grow' their language in an immersion environment through an unconscious internal process of meaning-mapping, chunking, and approximation, utilising the ever-present parental feedback. However, it *can* be doubted, and there is a huge literature debating this issue, that the majority of L2 learners will benefit from being expected to operate the same process – i.e. a process of absorbing language unconsciously – as the primary process in the L2 classroom. The assumption behind much of today's academic work on L2 language assimilation in the classroom is that we should be looking for a *natural* heuristic process among our L2 learners which only requires to be triggered by communicative exposure as it does for children and their L1. The corollary of this assumption – a mistaken assumption in my view – is that we should be exclusively exploiting this process in our *teaching* procedures i.e. that we should be merely giving our learners the right kind of language exposure and the learning will take care of itself. I think this assumption should be regarded with scepticism. Indeed, I would go as far as to say, from my practical experience, that it can only be one element, out of several, of the underlying process.

However, I will also not argue in favour of the traditional assumptions about language teaching. These are that the learning only of the 'bits' of language, and the practice and absorption of these bits into a deployable whole, is the single fundament of language teaching (whether these 'bits' are phonemes, structures, grammar rules, functional expressions, or lexical chunks).

I will argue for a two-way language-learning model in which 'process' is clearly evident, though *invisible and unknowable*, but in which 'bits' are clearly a main source of data for that process to work efficiently.

My articles

What I want to do in my series of articles is the following.

Firstly, I want to comment on a number of themes in modern thinking in language teaching. These themes are: the relationship between applied linguists and teachers; the history of language teaching theory and methodology; lexical views of language; task-based methodology; what is good teaching; ‘noticing’ – its nature and implications; questions about the idea of ‘standard international English’.

Secondly, I want to introduce two re-workings of concepts in pedagogic language analysis, both of which could significantly enhance the teaching of English everywhere. These are: ‘communicative chunking’ – a rethinking of discourse intonation; and the present perfect – a re-appraisal of this troublesome tense.

The titles of my articles are:

Introduction

- 1. The prologue – Where am I coming from? (the article you are reading)**

Philosophy

- 2. Do language teachers and applied linguists understand each other?**
- 3. Integration not eclecticism – a brief history of language teaching: 1853 – 2003**

Methodology

- 4. Noticing – a re-appraisal of its implications for language teaching methodology.**
- 5. ‘Authentic participation’ – integrating task-based and language-focus methodologies**
- 6. ‘Good teaching’ – a re-appraisal**

Syllabus

- 7. Lexical approaches now: the role of syntax and grammar**
- 8. A ‘Standard International English’ – where next?**

Language

- 9. The ‘music of English’ – a new model of communicative intonation and rhythm**
- 10. The present perfect – chimera or pussy cat?**

Starting assumptions

These are my eleven starting assumptions which I want to establish as a basis for the series of articles:

- 1. I think there are seven fundamentals to the arcane art and science of being an aware language teacher. I think these apply to anybody involved in this business at a high level, whether as teachers, trainers, managers, university lecturers, authors, or publishers:**
 - never stop regular classroom language teaching
 - learn (not acquire) a foreign language so you know how it feels
 - follow an ELT Diploma course
 - follow an ELT MA course
 - don’t stop thinking, don’t stop listening, don’t stop being fertile
 - train people to teach – it clarifies things
 - always ask your language students what is going on for them – you will be amazed

2. There have been two curious phenomena in the sociology of language teaching ever since the emergence of the profession in the 60s. These are (i) ‘the love of the new’ – let’s call its adherents ‘neophiles’ (ii) the ‘single factor fallacy’ – the ‘holy grail’ version of language learning psychology – the idea that there must be one secret key that, if discovered, would unlock the mind of every language learner and speed up their learning so exponentially fast that a revolution would take place in world communication.
3. We can always analyse and continually improve our teaching processes, but we can *never ultimately ‘know’ learning processes*, because these are only inferable by observation and thus are never more than speculation
4. My observations about the profession are that Applied Linguists and Teachers need to learn each other’s craft, and that there should be no dividing line between them. The artificial split between theory and practice has not only been dismantled by the ranks of teachers who have acquired the discipline of mental analysis, debate and research, it has also been shown in recent years to be delusory and irrelevant. Teachers, nevertheless, do need to acquire the mental disciplines developed by academics, and, equally, all ‘theoreticians’ need continually to be teaching language learners and maintaining their feeling for practice.
5. We can say, uncontentiously I think, that in order to learn a language, though students are varied, all of them do need (i) to *be exposed* to language, and (ii) to *activate* their so-far-developed internal version of it. How this takes place efficiently in classrooms is what is at the centre of the debate.
6. My view, from my intuition, observation, and experience, is that the underlying learning process, by which learners assimilate given language phenomena, centres on ‘noticing’:

-Sts **notice** items and phenomena of language when those items (i) are needed (ii) are identifiable (iii) make sense. This noticing may be conscious or unconscious.

-Language can be seen as having two characteristics:

- (i) It has ‘bits’ (which, after Saussure, have always been described as syntagmatic and paradigmatic).
- (ii) It has ‘process’ (which has been described as the invisible dynamic subtlety of finely-tuned discourse, plus the invisible underlay of social co-operation). This process, after Chomsky, is seen as a psychological language-specific sense-making device of some sort in every L1 learner. The question remains, however, whether its ‘automatic’ nature is retained beyond early childhood and deployed in the assimilation of L2. I think it may have only a limited use in L2.

-Students of any L2 clearly need to be explicitly exposed to both of these phenomena – bits and process - in the L2.

-Noticing can take place *at any time* (during a presentation, during a feedback slot, during a task, during a correction, during a homework exercise, sitting and thinking on the train home, during a reading text, during a conversation with a colleague, and so on).

-Noticing does not necessarily happen when the teacher is directing the attention of the learner.

- Noticing does not necessarily happen when the learner is applying mental effort.
- Noticing does happen at unknown moments of ‘connection’ in the mind of the learner. We do not actually ever know, therefore, at what point the learner notices something.
- Assimilation of a given language phenomenon appears to happen as a result of **‘layered noticing’** – in other words, a learner takes on board a given language phenomenon gradually and invisibly, little by little, during repeated exposure to it, until it reaches a certain ‘depth’. *This final point, at which it is ‘learnt’, is not knowable.*

To summarise, I believe that (i) noticing is exclusively a learning thing, not a teaching thing (ii) noticing is not necessarily a conscious process (iii) teachers can *invite* learners to notice, but they can never *make* them notice (iv) almost any activity in the classroom, even traditional methodology, if it makes sense to the learner, will be a potential ‘noticing opportunity’ for the learner (v) learners learn more than teachers teach.

This intuition is my theory of learning. Much of it is not original to me (viz Rutherford, 1987). And I can’t prove it. I can only test it against my further observations. This process will not lead to the truth, but merely to my own better teaching. No theory of learning can be tested empirically, and so will remain a speculation only.

7. If, and it is a big ‘if’, this is somewhere near the truth about the learning process, what can we do about it as teachers? Whether ‘bits’ or ‘process’, we do know that *what we teach is not what the students learn*. So, in my view, we had better simply maximise our best efforts to ‘help the students to notice’ the things about the language, as indeed many commentators now tell us to do.
 - a. With the ‘bits’, for example, I would suggest that *old ideas are just as legitimate as new ideas*. All we need to do is imagine that this presentation, or that controlled practice, is ‘helping the students to notice’ the lexis of the items in a kitchen, or the lexis of company structure, the prefabricated expressions (‘chunks’) we use on the telephone, or some common collocations we use in day-to-day English. Equally, with grammar, we can ‘help the students to notice’ the concept and workings of the (very English) Present Perfect or the workings of modal verbs. Such ‘helping to notice’ is referred to as ‘consciousness-raising’ by Rutherford, and his ideas are explored more fully in Batstone (1994) and Thornbury (2001).

With the ‘process’, in contrast, there is still much debate about (i) *whether* this can be mediated effectively via classroom activity – after all it could be an aspect of learning that we as teachers may have no influence on (ii) if we can influence it, *how* to do so. Without doubt, learners do need exposure to the ‘bits’. But they clearly do not *only* need this. They will assimilate the bits *not as bits but as emerging awareness through layered noticing*. And this is what Thornbury and others are calling the ‘uncovering of grammar’ or ‘grammaticisation’ (Thornbury 2001). How we may be able to facilitate this process will be the topic of two of my articles below, called (i) Noticing – a re-appraisal of its implications for language teaching methodology (ii) Authentic Participation – integrating task-based and language focus methodologies.

- b. Students continue to notice these items of language if they are attentive or in need, and this noticing can be *either* conscious and overt *or* invisible and unconscious. Language phenomena (bits or process) come to be noticed by the learner over time in a series of ‘exposures’. We teachers never know and can only marginally influence when those exposures will take place (ie when the learner actually ‘does the noticing’), because even if we say ‘OK everyone, get this!’ we can still not be sure that it is a noticing moment for the learner. Equally, the learner may suddenly, during a reading aloud exercise(!), notice and make sense of a language point quite without effort. So the noticing is in phases, and, for some complex or linguistically-distant language phenomena, these phases can be many. For simpler phenomena, they can be few, or maybe even concentrated into a single ‘eureka’ moment.
- c. All phases of ‘layered noticing’ involve all the senses and can be mediated via all the language skills. So, using the items in a speaking activity is as much part of noticing as hearing it in a listening text, or reading it in the newspaper.
- d. Students start to use these items of language with less effort when their noticing has reached sufficient depth that *the new language has become part of them*. For one language item, this can happen almost instantaneously, as with say a useful fixed phrase like ‘I don’t understand’. For another language phenomenon, it can take months of gradual ‘making sense’. Take the Present Perfect. Here, the learner grapples with an alien concept, L1 interference, and unhelpful teacher explanations, and after a number of successive approximations, they will either give up trying, and fossilise, or they will finally ‘get it’.

My definition of ‘learning’ is: ‘becoming *part* of the learner’¹. Teaching can only provide opportunities for noticing. It can not ensure noticing. Thus, we can never know when a student learns something. All we can know is *either* that at some point they learnt it, *or* at a given point they are in the middle of approximating it, as the processes of noticing take their course.

- 8. Where do teachers come into this noticing-assimilation process? Well, for learners in the natural learning environment, not at all. But in the classroom, it seems to me there is no doubt. Our singular obligations are to: (i) create opportunities for initial *noticing* (ii) create opportunities for *activation (followed by feedback and hence more noticing)*. The first of these requirements is carried via all the methods we have in our toolbox for focussing on language (PPP, yes PPP(!), task-based activities, feedback/reformulation work, etc). The second obligation, activation, has two rationales, to show us how well the assimilation process for each learner is going, and to provide more opportunities for individual reformulation and hence noticing. Activation tasks include all the traditional repertoire of accuracy practice activities (controlled and semi-controlled), plus the traditional fluency activities (such as role-plays). It also includes all the new, more task-based, activities (à la Jane Willis), with their emphasis on task objectives, need-induced language identification, and focussed activation and feedback. The point here is that,

¹ The notion of separate short-term and long-term memories, with one leading into the other, is based on a ‘machine’ metaphor. A more holistic reality for the workings of memory and learning is much more likely, as discussed in the extensive literature on neural networks, and in Mary Midgley’s *The Myths We Live By* (Routledge, 2003)

old and new alike, we have fought over methodologies for decades, with claims to greater efficiency and better matching to learning psychology of this method or that approach. *In the noticing model, if we teach with awareness, all methods are equally valid.*

Since we can never know the learning process, all we can do as teachers is *invite* the learner to notice aspects of the language – whether these aspects come as ‘bits’ or ‘process’ - and leave the rest to the learner, who will, up to a point in their own time, take on board what they wish to. The key question for teachers then becomes: which bits and which process? It becomes a question of syllabus, and this is the subject of two of my articles: firstly, the nature, role and desirability of a ‘Standard International English’, and secondly, the role of grammar and syntax in a lexical view of language.

9. For me, language as communication is most usefully described as ‘grammaticalised lexis’ rather than ‘lexicalised grammar’. This is an issue one has to take a view on as a teacher, and many teachers continue to see it the other way round – the traditional way, let’s say. I do not think there is a right or wrong here; it is just that one has to have a clear starting point for one’s own thinking. It doesn’t matter much either way, because the psychological reality of language is probably something profoundly different from either of these views. As a teacher of an L2, however, I need to be clear how I want to divide up the language for teaching purposes, and ‘grammaticalised lexis’ is how I choose to see it.

However, I do not subscribe to the view that we should teach only lexis to students! Indeed, quite the opposite. I teach grammar – upfront and unashamedly – because even if the language is carried largely in the lexis, the grammar is (i) the underlying system (ii) the only thing which connects the lexis so that it can be used to make sophisticated messages (iii) capable of being parcelled into small ‘structures’ which can be easily understood and applied.

10. We should never stand still in our thinking and always listen to the views of the other guy, always dare to think for ourselves, and always base our thinking firmly in classroom experience – for nothing else ultimately counts. There is an understandable tendency, as Kuhn says in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, during a period when no acceptable universal paradigm has yet been established, for people to want to make big claims for apparently new ideas, in the hope that they might be seen as the heralds of a new paradigm. I call this ‘neophilism’ – the love of the new. The current focuses, often touted as single-factor panaceas, seem to be on task-based learning, lexical views of language, grammaticisation, corpus linguistics, and such-like things. All have variously been hailed as the new way forward. All are undoubtedly excellent lines of enquiry. But let us keep our perspective! They will inform the continuing evolution of classroom method, but *they are unlikely radically to alter it*. A key error I noticed in one article on paradigm shift a few years ago, was the idea that a new paradigm should sweep away all that has gone before. Far from it. As Kuhn says, and Popper too with his ideas on good and bad theory, the paradigm has to *incorporate* and *account for* the old theory and the old evidence, not sweep it away.
11. Trust your own perceptions. Don’t only read the theory of the Applied Linguists. Feel your way back into the reality of your own language learning experience. And for any

curious event in the classroom, always simply ask yourself: “What is really going on here?” A nice book, which puts this point well, is *Inside Teaching*, by Tim Bowen and Jonathon Marks.

Summaries

I hope that, in these articles, there is something for everyone, from the most recent rookie in the classroom to the most seasoned oak-tree in the corridors of a university. In the first one, on applied linguists and teachers, I attempt to enhance the increasingly fruitful relationship between those at the chalk-face and those in high towers. In my article on the history of ELT, my idea is to provide a context for all our discussions, to show how often what goes around comes around, and to champion the notion of integration of the past into all things current. Next, I talk about the idea of ‘noticing’, which I think is fundamental to all our principled behaviour in the classroom. In the articles on ‘authentic participation’ and ‘good teaching’, I propose new ways of approaching familiar things. Then, in the articles on syllabus, I firstly challenge the domination of lexis in the lexical approach, and then I support the case for a Standard International English. And finally I suggest a complete re-working of (i) intonation and rhythm teaching, (ii) the present perfect. The aim of the whole is that it is a whole.

The message throughout the articles is this: the more that new ideas shed light on what we do, the more we should remember our roots, keep our feet on the ground, and integrate the new with the old. We should remember that the relationship between the teacher and their students is as old as human history. The humanity of that relationship will always continue unchanged.

Conclusions

In many ways, I think the key to teaching is to just relax. In a world where everybody is chasing something, we can make our lives in the classroom, and in the staff-room, a whole lot easier, just by taking our foot off the throttle. Above all, if we can see the wood for the trees, we can become far less magnetised by the latest fads, and far more our own person in the classroom, operating with the deeper understanding that only a combination of intuition, common sense, mental training, human awareness, and sound classroom experience, can give us.

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