

3. Integration not eclecticism: a brief history of language teaching, 1853 – 2003

Abstract

*The purpose of this article is to give some context to the current discussions abounding in language teaching classrooms around the world. I think it is essential to judge the most recently marketed approaches in the light of what has gone before. And following Thomas Kuhn, who wrote the seminal *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, my suggestion is that we integrate and account for, rather than sweep away, past approaches.*

Introduction

Below is a potted history of the most well-known approaches and attitudes to language in the second language classroom over the last hundred years or so. As you will notice, many of the themes get recycled in different forms, but each time a ‘new’ approach develops it adds a slightly different perspective and expands our understanding. All of these approaches were seen to work at some point, and so none can be discounted. It is my absolute conviction that every one still has its place in the grand pantheon of language-teaching approaches, and that aware experienced teachers will be able to utilise all of them in an intuitive, and yet consciously integrated way, in their classrooms.

1850s – 1950s: Grammar Translation

How language was taught in most schools; grammar was taught as a set of rules (e.g. verb conjugations) after the classical languages, Latin and Greek; practice was done through written exercises; the medium of instruction was the mother tongue; vocabulary was learnt via translated lists, often related to the comprehension of written texts; written text was seen as the ‘real’ language, superior to the spoken version; written texts were translated and composition in L2 was regarded as the apex of language ability; speaking and listening were seen as less important, and mediated via ‘conversation classes’ which were tagged on as extras to the main course.

1890s – now: Direct Method

Specific to the Berlitz chain of schools, started in the USA; the brainchild of the entrepreneur himself; speaking and listening were the most important skills; the medium of instruction was English; students learnt sequences of strictly-chosen (i.e. centrally-scripted) grammatical phrases by listening and repetition; grammar ‘rules’ were avoided, and replaced by phrases (which of course had grammar disguised in them); vocabulary was learnt either incidentally, as part of the phrases being taught, or via lists grouped under types of situation; its modern incarnation survives in the omnipresent language phrasebooks, and the method is still the basis of lower-level teaching in Berlitz’s ubiquitous and successful language schools.

1960s – 1970s (USA): Audio-lingual method + Structuralist view of language

A ‘scientificised’ version of the direct method; the new science of linguistics suggested that language was a set of ‘structures’ (e.g. ‘this shirt needs + washing, mending, ironing, etc’; ‘he has + washed, ironed, folded, etc the clothes’); grammar *rules* were an illusion, so it was more important to focus on these ‘structures’; vocabulary was seen as an adjunct to the structures; speaking and listening were the most important skills; the learning method was based on behaviourist psychology – stimulus-response learning; language exercises for speaking were

mostly listen and repeat (i.e. drilling), and repeat and extend; language exercises for writing were multiple choice and gapfill; thinking was discouraged, automaticity of response was favoured; the language laboratory epitomised the audio-lingual approach and was meant to revolutionise language teaching – the reason that it did not do so was simply, as with computers nowadays, that most learners need people as teachers, not machines; a lasting legacy of this approach is the much-loved substitution table.

1960s –1980s (UK): Structural-situational method (aka PPP)

This was a pragmatic (i.e. UK) version of audio-lingualism; the key difference from the audio-lingual approach was that the language presentation and practice was situationalised and so was always given social meaning; speaking and listening were the most important skills; this approach gave rise to the idea of PPP (presentation, practice, production) – here, a given language point, say the Present Simple Tense for routines (called the target item), was presented (P) and given controlled practice (P) and then given further semi-controlled practice (P) (often called ‘free practice’) in say a role-play; it all took place in one lesson; all the techniques of audio-lingual method were used, but the famous ‘situation’ was added (mimes, pictures, sounds); it was assumed that what we taught during these three stages was what the students should *learn*, and pundits remained focused for decades on how to optimise this process; this equation of teaching and learning is now seen as a false goal; PPP has been rubbished recently by proponents of task-based methodology, a criticism in my view based on a deliberately false characterisation of PPP (see Articles 4 and 5).

1970s – 1980s: Humanistic approaches

Emanating from the USA, and particularly championed by Earl Stevick, this movement was based on the assumption that language classes were places of fear for language learners; specifically associated with: the Silent Way, Community Language Learning, Suggestopaedia, and Total Physical Response; many in the UK questioned Stevick’s basic assumption, as the UK’s pragmatic teaching tradition had long taken account of so-called ‘affective’ factors in language teaching, and UK language teaching was famous for its engaging and ‘fun’ qualities; however, the philosophy of the humanistic approaches was valuable, and since then, it has become an essential precept of language teaching that students assimilate things best when they are talking about themselves, something now called ‘personalisation’; strangely, it was my experience that proponents of humanistic approaches were often rather dictatorial in their conference demonstrations!

1970s –1990s: Functional syllabuses – Communicative Language Teaching 1

Emanating from the work of the Council of Europe in the 60s, the first tranche of the communicative ‘revolution’ was based on the idea of grouping bits of language according to communicative functions (in the USA called ‘speech acts’) like apologising, requesting, and advising; it was rare for a direct relationship between function and language to be established because functions can be expressed by a vast range of expression and non-verbal cues; however, where a clear direct relationship could be found (e.g. ‘*my apologies*’ for apologising, ‘*do you mind if I*’ + *pres simple*, for asking permission), it was regarded as a matter of convention only, to be used for teaching purposes, not for authentic linguistic description; these ‘bits’ were called ‘exponents’, so a number of ‘conventional exponents’, covering the range from formal to informal, could be related to each key function; students were taught these exponents, often, misguidedly, at

the expense of grammar!; no obvious *method* was suggested by defining language in this way, so the listen-and-repeat and repeat-and-extend methods persisted, and rightly so, because, as such phrases depended for their usefulness on accurate rhythm and intonation, various forms of drill lent themselves well.

1975 – now: Communicative methodology – Communicative Language Teaching 2

The second tranche of the communicative ‘revolution’ really took off by the early 80s, mostly radiating out from the UK; the key principle was the separation of classroom work into ‘accuracy’ work and ‘fluency’ work; accuracy work was for concentrating on learning new bits of language (grammar patterns, functional exponents, vocabulary, etc); fluency work was for getting the students to speak freely (say in discussions); much confusion was caused when teachers were trained to see these as closely linked together, with accuracy work *leading* to fluency work (see PPP above), which is actually not possible (see below); the basic principle of all communicative activities in the classroom, whether accuracy-based or fluency-based, was the ‘*information gap*’, which has remained with us ever since; the ‘communicative revolution’, via the information gap, has been very profound and real, and has coursed through every aspect of method, whether accuracy or fluency oriented; as an example of the accuracy-oriented information gap, we can have ‘communicative drills’ (e.g. students interview each other about their daily routines to get controlled practice of Present Simple for routines); and as an example of a fluency-oriented information gap, we can have free discussion, where the students discuss a real thing without interruption and the teacher takes notes of the mistakes and feeds these back afterwards.

In the US in the late 70s, an influential version of second language learning theory was developed by Stephen Krashen, which postulated that learners ‘*acquired*’ language if fed a diet of genuine communication (as does the child acquiring the first language), but they only ‘*learnt*’ language if fed a diet of classroom exercises; the result was that many teachers started to believe that (unconscious) ‘acquisition’ was profounder, more real, and therefore better, than (conscious) ‘learning’; these teachers decided that the classroom had to become an immersive ‘bath’ of authentic communication; this attitude persists today in many classrooms, at the expense of conscious learning; in fact, many variations of the learning-acquisition model have since emerged (including those of Bialystok, Long, and Rutherford), and a combined processing model seems to be the current favourite, which is to say that the classroom learner probably operates both mechanisms – learning and acquisition – all the time, with some interchange between the two; it is now thought, increasingly, that teachers cannot strongly influence how these mechanisms are used by their students.

1980 – now: Test-Teach-Test

‘Test-teach-test’ was an inventive variation of traditional PPP, particularly appropriate to teaching functional exponents but also adaptable to grammar points and lexis; the students are given a task, such as a role-play, without any prior teaching of the relevant language points, and this is the first TEST phase; if the students have problems and make mistakes, the teacher knows that they have to teach the biggest errors, and this teaching (also known as ‘Presentation’) is the TEACH phase; this is followed by the students doing further practice exercises of these target items, which is the second TEST phase; all in all, this is a popular and resilient piece of methodology which brings together a number of principles, and has stood the test of time.

1985 – now: Negotiated syllabus

Mostly relevant to executive and Business English students where needs are specific and focused; it has become the norm for many professional language training organisations; based on the principle that we first find out what students *want* and test them to find out what they *need*, and then negotiate the syllabus with them; it has recently had a big impact on general English classes too; it is especially good when the syllabus is emerging and flexible and is being negotiated on a regular basis during the whole course; because it is diametrically different from school-set syllabuses and exam-oriented syllabuses, it has to be applied carefully, depending on whether it is appropriate to the specific context.

1985 – now: Task-based approaches

This is very relevant to business English teaching, and has been solidly part of Business English teaching since the late 80s; since the mid-90s it has become much more established in General English teaching; it is a methodological idea which attempts to get away from PPP altogether; students are not taught language points in advance, but rather are given communicative ‘tasks’ to prepare for; these tasks require them to ask the teacher to ‘give’ them whatever language bits they might need in order to fulfil the task; an example would be ‘have the students in groups plan a recreational weekend in London for a visiting friend coming to London’; here, the language they need will be: discussion exponents, telephoning language, arrangement language, lexis of sightseeing, etc; each group would be given what language they need by the teacher *as they ask for it*; in the final phase, the students actually do the complete task and they ‘use’ the language they have asked for and been given.

The best place to find a clear outline of this approach is Willis (1996); the best General English textbook series using this approach is the ‘*Cutting Edge Series*’ by Peter Moor and Sarah Cunningham; in the Business English context, teachers tend to use the task-based approach as a matter of course, with telephone role-plays, meetings, negotiations, and presentations; a big question still being widely discussed is whether the students, on being ‘given’ the language they need for their task, then need some controlled practice so that it becomes more assimilated – in other words, do students need some form of rapid PPP?; since it appears to have gained ideological popularity especially in the UK, there may be a danger that the task-based approach dominates teaching to the detriment of the other methodologies which have equal validity.

1990 – now: Lexical views of language

As early as the 1970s, academic linguists noticed that the language was *full* of set phrases (e.g. you don’t say!, onwards and upwards, a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do, the knock-on effect of, it’s a good job (that) . . ., etc, etc); in 1986, a famous duo, Pawley and Syder (1983) showed that these set phrases are actually part of a memorised store of pre-fabricated ‘chunks’ which, once learnt, each native speaker has *automatically* at their disposal; when speaking, they said, we appear to use these chunks like single vocabulary units; since then, notably through the writings of Michael Lewis in the early 1990s, the Lexical View of Language has become a central plank of both Business and General English teaching; it particularly affects what we teach – lexical chunks rather than single items of vocabulary, (e.g. *to make an appointment, to do business with, to penetrate the market, market forces, healthy competition, an absolute disaster*, etc) – *and*, some have argued, lexical chunks in place of *grammar* (e.g. *should + infinitive* is seen by some as a lexical chunk not as a piece of grammar); nowadays, it is normal to see lexical expressions as the main lexical content of a textbook unit; a big challenge which still remains is how to prevent the lexical approach dominating teaching to the detriment of the other components of the language

learning task, such as grammar, syntax, and phonology (see Article 7).

1995 – now: Output - Feedback

Again originating mainly in the Business English field, this is less an approach, more an attitude of mind, based on the idea of an immersive bath of communication from which useful language focus then arises – if we simply set our students off in authentic communicative activities in the classroom, we can use the ensuing language ‘output’ as data for feedback (or ‘reformulation’); this feedback is one form of language focus, and can take many forms (see Article 4 on language focus) such as individualised feedback sheets, overhead slides full of errors for class discussion, full-scale remedial presentations, etc.

A really interesting extension of this idea is ‘Reformulate Output Lightly but Often’ - ROLO (Emmerson 1999); the teacher listens to the students discussing something, notes the problems down, and then goes through a sequence involving eliciting, concept questions, and guiding questions, so that the students come to a reformulated version of the selected language errors from their discussion; these corrected errors get recycled in a similar way, lightly but often, over the next few lessons.

1995 – now: Noticing (also known as 'consciousness-raising')

Some studies into the psychology of classroom language learning showed that there is little relationship between what the teacher teaches in one lesson and what students learn in that lesson as conscious learning; at the same time, William Rutherford in the mid 80s put forward the idea of using the classroom to gradually *raise students' awareness* about the target language rather than imagine that teachers can teach it for active reproduction by endless practice; what this means is that when we do presentation and practice work with students on any language item, *all* we are actually doing is *raising the noticeability* of that language in the minds of the students; in other words, we are *helping the student to notice* it the next time and the next time, and little by little to take it on board in a process of ‘successive approximation’, or ‘layered noticing’; we are *not* teaching it for immediate active accurate production; this awareness-raising is therefore only the first stage of a series of stages by which the language item, and the language awareness surrounding it, passes into the unconscious of the student; the concept of ‘reformulation’ (reflective correction) is very much connected with the idea of raising noticeability; *the process of assimilation by the student is an unknowable and invisible process*, so we don’t need to concern ourselves with it; my thought on this is that PPP (i.e. one out of many types of *accuracy* work) has an important place in language teaching, not to *teach* language points but to raise their noticeability in the minds of the students.

As a matter of note, the place of *fluency* work (e.g. free role-play) in the noticing model has two functions (i) to provide free-speaking scenarios in which we can assess the students’ current state of progress and assimilation (ii) to show what language points still need more focus and practice i.e. language focus via reformulation (see Output-Feedback above); these activities are a form of informal *testing*; they do not function as the ‘production’ phase of a PPP approach, because that is by definition a semi-controlled, and therefore accuracy-oriented, phase.

1999 - now: Grammaticisation

Recently, very much in the 'noticing' mould, there has been a growth of interest in classroom tasks which help the student to see grammar in its global, and truly communicative context; some modern academic linguists' take the view that language is 'grammaticalised lexis' (rather than the view from the last 100 years that it is 'lexicalised grammar'); using this principle for language syllabuses, some schools have dispensed with grammar, and give the title 'lexis' to many language 'bits' which once might have been called grammar; as for language exercises, we can use global text exercises (using semi-authentic and authentic texts) in which the 'grammar' has been taken out (i.e. the inflections, the articles, the infinitive markers, etc), and which the students have then to put back, e.g. "*Federal Reserve Bank expect lower interest rate today eleven time this year, drive them low level four decade*"; this is very motivating for the learners, it is very individualised, and it is very efficient for the teacher, who only has to spend time clarifying the language items which are causing problems; the 'grammaticisation' approach is becoming increasingly popular (see Thornbury 2001, for an extensive discussion of the idea), but it is important to keep it in perspective with the other approaches to teaching grammar, which all have their relevance (see Article 4 on Noticing).

2002: The Modern Integrated Language Teacher

We use **translation** when it is quick and efficient to get across meaning; we still teach **grammar**, even though we no longer assume it to be a starting point, but more a reference point; we use **drilling** (e.g. listen-repeat) when it is an efficient way for students to get their mouths round the sounds and rhythm of a useful expression; we use **practice exercises** (e.g. gap-fills) to raise students' awareness of common lexical expressions; we use focus on **functional expressions** when students listen to a tape model of a telephone call; we use **information gaps** almost all the time, in accuracy as well as fluency work; we use **personalisation** all the time, whether the students are practising language, preparing for a role-play, or reading the newspaper; we use a **task-based approach** when students are set a discussion role-play and are required to prepare their positions in groups, asking for language help from the teacher as they go along; we use **output-feedback** when the teacher uses a conversation activity to produce student 'output', and then feeds back on language errors; we use **test-teach-test** when students are set a short telephone-call role-play without time to prepare, and this is taped and followed up with focus on (i.e. introduction and practice, or PP, of) telephone phrases, which is then followed by another telephone role-play (the third P); we use **noticing** activities practically all the time, because *any* activity in which the students are being invited to *put their attention* on an aspect of language is a noticing activity; we use **grammaticisation** activities when we want to see how each student's individual internal grammar is progressing.

It has been a curious tendency in ELT for both the perpetrators of new ideas, and for many teachers, to want to dispense with the old to make way for the new. This cannot be right. The modern teacher is able to use any approach from the past as long as it is appropriate and useful. You may have heard the term 'principled eclecticism'. I prefer the term '**principled integration**', because 'eclecticism' suggests picking separate things from the selection available, whereas 'integration' forces us to remember that everything has come from what has been before, and that everything that has gone before remains relevant today.

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