TWO OUT OF THREE AIN'T ENOUGH: THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS OF A LANGUAGE COURSE

IT'S ALL VERY COMPLICATED

Looking over the programme at the beginning of an IATEFL conference, one can easily experience two rather contradictory reactions. First of all, sheer gratitude. Such an occasion offers us a remarkable opportunity to meet colleagues, exchange ideas and extend our professional knowledge. Annual conferences don't arrange themselves, and we owe a considerable debt to the many people whose work, past and present, has made this kind of event possible.

A second, equally valid, reaction is bewilderment. Titles of sessions on this year's programme included references to the following topics, among many others:

> *anxiety, CALL, classroom research, collaborative learning, consciousness-raising, corpus, critical discourse analysis, critical reading, cultural awareness, developing teacher reflection, ELF, innovation management, interactivity, intercultural competence, internet, IT, kinaesthetic learners, learner differences, learner independence, learner preferences, learner training, learner's self-concept, metaphor, motivation, multiple intelligences, negotiated interaction, new technologies, pragmatics, prefabs, professional development, reflective practice, scaffolding, strategy training, teacher's role, ...*

(And if I told you that there was a seminar on 'multiple kinaesthetic interactive classroom discourse strategy development', you might have to think for a moment before you could be quite sure I was making it up.) It is easy to see how a young teacher, attending IATEFL for the first time, can feel daunted and discouraged: 'If I need to know about all this in order to be a good English teacher, how am I ever going to manage it?'

When I started in ELT, you had to know how to teach grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and the 'four skills'. We have come a very long way since then, and this is all to the good; but there really is an awful lot to know about. The landscape has become extremely complicated, and we don't seem to have much in the way of maps – it is not nearly as easy as it used to be to see where we are going and how to get there. Does this matter? Perhaps not. Should we, in the spirit of the age, avoid getting hung up on product, and decide that it is the process which is important – so that it is enough to choose roads that look interesting, and go where they take us? To travel hopefully, Stevenson said, is a better thing than to arrive. This is certainly the view of more than one influential scholar in the field. Kumaravidevelu tells us (2006: 195) that according to the principles of 'Exploratory Practice' developed by Allwright and others, 'the quality of life in the language classroom is much more important than instructional efficiency'. And Ellis, arguing for a full-scale task-based approach to language teaching, says that the blurring of the distinction between syllabus and methodology is an 'attractive feature' of task-based work, and that a central tenet of the approach is arguably the idea that 'no attempt is made to specify what learners will learn, only how they will learn' (2003: 30–31).

I believe that this attitude is profoundly mistaken. The world is full of language learners who travel hopefully without arriving, and these learners are not generally pleased. Language learning and teaching cost time, effort and money, and it is reasonable to expect a product – a knowledge of a language – as a result. A language course should, therefore, contain the essential elements which will make this result possible. What are these elements? The topics listed above may all contribute usefully to more effective learning and teaching, but they are not in themselves constitutive of a language course. We need to know what are the fundamental components that actually make language teaching work.

Language teaching takes place, of course, in a vast variety of contexts, and there are very great differences between these. One thing that is common to all situations, though, is that teaching and learning can fail – things can go wrong. Essentially, this can happen for three reasons. One is that teachers and learners may simply be working under impossible circumstances: there may be far too little time for effective teaching, or classes may be dominated by undisciplined students who are determined not to learn. A second reason for failure is that teachers may just not be doing things right: the methodology may be so inappropriate, or the quality of the teaching so poor, that no significant learning is possible. Thirdly – and this is what I want to focus on – teachers may not be doing the right things.

What are these right things? In what follows, I shall offer a suggested answer to this question – a map, so to speak, showing what I think are the main roads through the complicated language-teaching terrain. I must stress that this is a personal view, not based on empirical research, and scarcely to be dignified with the name of 'theory'. It does, however, derive from many years of practical involvement in, and thought about, language teaching.

THREE ELEMENTS

Language learners need **extensive input**. Children learning their mother tongues are immersed in a bath of language, some of it roughly attuned to their level of development, much of it not. Without this element, it is unlikely that they would succeed in acquiring language. Second-language learners, similarly, must have extensive input – they need to be exposed to quantities of spoken and written language, authentic or not too tidied up, for their unconscious acquisition processes to work on.

Equally, learners need **intensive input** – small samples of language which can be assimilated, memorised, analysed unconsciously, and/or used as templates for future production. Children instinctively seek this kind of input, and their caretakers instinctively provide it, in the form of nursery rhymes, songs and stories, which – children insist – must always be repeated in exactly the same words. Daily routines also provide children with intensive samples of language – the little scripts that are repeated at mealtimes, bathtime, bedtime and so on. Adult second-language learners are no different in principle: they too need intensive engagement with small samples of language which they can internalise, process, make their own and use as bases for their own production. (For a fascinating discussion of this element of language acquisition and use, see Cook (2000).)

A third kind of input is what one might call **analysed**: information about the workings of particular aspects of the language, presented implicitly or explicitly. As far as first-language acquisition is concerned, this is perhaps of less importance: children naturally pick up grammar and pronunciation without being told anything about the workings of the very complex systems involved, and corrective feedback generally has little effect. (On the other hand, children are very conscious of their need for explanations of vocabulary – English-speaking children learn something like eight new words a day – and they very often ask for explicit information about words: 'What's a …?'; 'What's that?'; 'What does … mean?'.) While the value of analysed input to adult second-language learners has become controversial, it seems likely that it is helpful or necessary for at least some aspects of language. Since adult learners are past the critical period when a perfect command of a language can be acquired naturally and unconsciously, and since instructed second-language learners have only a fraction of the input that is available to child first-language learners, the deliberate teaching of regularities helps to compensate for the inadequacy of naturalistic exposure.

Input, of course, is only half the story. By and large, people seem to learn best what they use most. Children produce quantities of extensive output, activating what they have taken in by, in many cases, chattering non-stop. They also recycle the intensive input they have received, repeating their stories, nursery rhymes and so on, and speaking their lines in the recurrent daily scripts of childhood life. Some children, at least, also seem to produce certain kinds of analysed output, rehearsing and trying out variations on structures that they have been exposed to, like more formal language learners doing 'pattern practice' (Weir 1970).

Adults, of course, also need opportunities to produce all three kinds of output. They must have the chance to engage in extensive, 'free' speech and writing; they must be able to do controlled practice in which they recycle the intensive input that they have more or less internalised (and thus complete the process of internalisation); and they need to practise the analysed patterns and language items that have been presented to them, so that they have some chance of carrying them over into spontaneous fluent production.

A properly-balanced language-teaching programme, then, has three ingredients – extensive, intensive and analysed – at both input and output stages. All three ingredients are important. A song by Meatloaf has the chorus:

I want you
I need you
but there ain't no way I'm ever going to love you.
Now don't be sad
'cause two out of three ain't bad.

Leaving aside the question of whether Meatloaf's addressee is comfortable with this reduced offering, one thing is certain: in language teaching, two out of three ain't enough.

A BALANCED PROGRAMME			
INPUT	**EXTENSIVE**	**INTENSIVE**	**ANALYSED**
	• books, magazines etc • speech	• spoken or written texts studied in detail • material learnt by heart	rules, examples, lists
OUTPUT	**EXTENSIVE**	**INTENSIVE**	**ANALYSED**
	• free writing • free speaking	controlled speaking or writing reusing learnt material.	exercises

GAPS IN COURSES

It is instructive to look at some typical language teaching approaches (discussed here in rather stereotypical versions) to see how well they satisfy this principle. Nearly always, something is missing.

One formula, traditional but still very common in various guises round the world, is a course-type that relies heavily on teacher-fronted text study, often coursebook-based (textbooks, as the name implies, tend to be disturbingly text-heavy). This approach is strong on 'intensive' input (though I shall suggest below that this is often pseudo-intensive); analysed input also typically gets good coverage, at least as regards grammar; extensive input is usually weak or completely lacking. As far as intensive output is concerned, the input from text study is not generally recycled very efficiently – often, all that the learners do with it is to answer a few so-called 'comprehension' questions. Analysed output is common, in the form of grammar exercises. There is often little or no extensive output.

Although we like to feel that we have moved on from the methods of a century or so ago, there are actually close structural resemblances between a modern text-heavy course and a grammar-translation approach (though the methodology is somewhat different). Similarly, the audiolingual approach that was popular a few decades ago, revolutionary though it was felt to be, differed mainly in the type of text that was used (spoken rather than written), and in the methodology of grammar teaching; the balance of ingredients was not very different. Revolutions do not always change the underlying structure of things very much.

THE TEXT-HEAVY FORMULA			
INPUT	**EXTENSIVE**	**INTENSIVE**	**ANALYSED**
	readers?	• written texts studied more or less in detail • ‘listening’ material?	grammar rules and examples
OUTPUT	**EXTENSIVE**	**INTENSIVE**	**ANALYSED**
	occasional free composition and/or conversation practice?	answers to ‘comprehension’ questions	grammar exercises and tests

Heavily ‘communicative’ courses do have a rather different kind of structure, but again, there are problems of coverage and balance. Typically, they are much stronger than more ‘traditional’ course types on output. On the other hand, there may be little extensive input, and far less analysed input or output than in ‘traditional’ courses – this element may be limited to studying and practising the language of particular communicative functions (‘apologising’, ‘eliciting personal information’, ‘inviting’, ‘enquiring about timetables’ and so on).

ONE KIND OF ‘COMMUNICATIVE’ COURSE			
INPUT	**EXTENSIVE**	**INTENSIVE**	**ANALYSED**
	• written material? • recorded speech?	• input material for communicative activities • ‘listening’ texts	lists of functional language?
OUTPUT	**EXTENSIVE**	**INTENSIVE**	**ANALYSED**
	• discussion • role play	communicative activities	‘functional’ practice?

Some approaches – what one might call the Atkins Diets of language teaching – simply leave out most of the ingredients. One extreme case is the kind of course (if it was ever put into practice) recommended by scholars such as Stephen Krashen a couple of decades ago. The basic principle was that ‘comprehensible input’ was all that was needed for successful acquisition. If this was provided, output would take care of itself. ‘Theoretically, speaking and writing are not essential to acquisition. One can acquire ‘competence’ in a second language, or a first language, without ever producing it’ (Krashen 1981: 107–8). Furthermore, analysed input such as grammar rules was said to be useless, since (it was claimed) it had no effect on acquisition, and would not carry over into spontaneous production. While the ‘input is all’ line of thought was greatly consoling to teachers who had trouble getting output from their learners (they no longer needed to try), it can scarcely have benefited the students of any teachers who took it seriously.

'COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT IS ALL'			
INPUT	**EXTENSIVE**	**INTENSIVE**	**ANALYSED**
	• written material • recorded speech	• written material • recorded speech	
OUTPUT	**EXTENSIVE**	**INTENSIVE**	**ANALYSED**

At the other extreme, what one might call the hard-core task-based approach, recommended by some contemporary researchers, puts almost all the emphasis on extensive output, to which everything else is subordinated.

HARD-CORE TASK-BASED			
INPUT	**EXTENSIVE**	**INTENSIVE**	**ANALYSED**
	pre-task reading/listening?		incidental focus on form during task performance
OUTPUT	**EXTENSIVE**	**INTENSIVE**	**ANALYSED**
	task performance	planned task performance task repetition	

BALANCE

While a normal language course must, I believe, contain all three elements, they do not of course need to occur in equal proportions: the appropriate balance will depend on the learners' level, their purposes and their learning context. In particular, if students are learning a language in the country where it is spoken, or if other parts of their education are in the target language, extensive input and perhaps output may be taken care of outside the language course. And analysed input and output are likely to be less appropriate or necessary for younger learners. But in general terms, in my view, these criteria apply; so that if students fail to learn, it may simply be because their course is not doing all the right things. It is, therefore, worth checking over the menu that our materials, activities and syllabuses are offering to our students. Do the ingredients – text-study, grammar, dictation, comprehension, communicative tasks or whatever – add up to a balanced diet, or are essential elements missing? As in other areas of life, it is important to look not only at what we are doing, but at what we are not doing.

A COMMON WEAKNESS: PSEUDO-INTENSIVE WORK

For successful language teaching, I believe that it is essential to link intensive input and output effectively. The intensive element works (or should work) like this:

1. Students engage with a sample of language – generally a short spoken or written text of some kind.
2. They work hard enough on this sample to make some of the language their own: words, expressions and structures stick in their minds; perhaps whole stretches of the text are even memorised (as when a dialogue is learnt by heart).
3. Then their acquisition of the new input is consolidated by output work – by using what they have learnt, they fix it in their memories and make it available for future use.

What happens in classrooms, all too often, is not quite like that. Briefly: the 'intensive' input isn't really intensive, and the intensive output doesn't really happen. One common version of this pseudo-intensive cycle involves the kind of lesson that we have all seen, and perhaps given, where the teacher uses a text as the basis for a kind of free-association fireworks display. He or she comments on one word, expression or structure after another, elicits synonyms and antonyms, pursues ideas sparked off by the text, perhaps gets the students to read aloud or translate bits, and so on and so on. Meanwhile the students – or at least, the conscientious ones – write down hundreds of pieces of new information in those overfilled notebooks that someone once memorably called ‘word cemeteries’. What happens next? The students answer some so-called ‘comprehension questions’ (what exactly are these for?), and then perhaps go away to write a homework on a topic distantly related (or even not at all related) to that of the text. At the end of the cycle the students have been given much too much input, have engaged with it too superficially for much of it to be assimilated, and have used (and therefore consolidated) little or none of it. They have been taught – inefficiently – one lot of language, and then asked to produce a substantially different lot.

HOW TO GET IT RIGHT

It is not actually very difficult to link intensive input and output more constructively: it just needs a clear understanding of how texts can be used effectively for language teaching. There are all sorts of possible approaches – the key technique is to select a relatively small text (spoken or written) that contains some useful language, to work over it quite thoroughly (so that students are at least halfway to knowing it by heart), and to give them an activity in which they can reuse the material interestingly. Here is one way of doing it with a lower-level class:

- Take a story or other text of perhaps 200 words.
- Read it to the class, with explanations where necessary.
- Ask what they can remember.
- Read it again and see how much more they can recall.
- Hand out the text / get them to open their books.
- Go through the text explaining and answering questions where necessary, but concentrating particularly on a relatively small number of useful language points (perhaps 8-12) which the students don’t yet have an active command of.
- Tell them to note and learn these points.
- Ask them to choose for themselves a few other words, expressions or structures that they think it would be useful to learn.
- Get them to close their books or put away the text, and ask recall questions (NOT ‘comprehension questions’), designed specifically to get them to say or write the words and expressions picked out for learning.
- Finally, set a written homework in which they are expected to use most of the new material, but in their own way. (For instance, ask them to tell the story they have studied in the form of a letter written by one of the characters in it; or to write about a similar incident from their own experience.)

There are plenty of other ways of achieving this level of close engagement with input material, followed by creative output using what has been learnt. Students can work on a dialogue, and then script and perform (or improvise) new dialogues on a similar theme. One class I heard about hijacked the whole of their boring textbook, rewriting the stories and dialogues with added elements (a pregnancy, an explosion, an arrest, a lottery win, alien invaders, …) to make them more interesting, and thus using what they had learnt in highly original and motivating ways. What is essential is that students should, little by little, build up a repertoire of key vocabulary and structures that they have made their own by working on them intensively and reusing them in this way. Compared with the typical ‘text study - comprehension questions - free writing’ cycle, the crucial difference is that learners do *more* with *less*, so that they really do learn and remember what they take in, instead of forgetting most of it before the lesson is over.

WHY THE GAPS?

If a language course lacks some of the essential ingredients, this may be for several possible reasons. One is purely practical: in many teaching situations round the world, it can be hard to provide extensive input. There isn't time in class for students to do extensive reading; it may not be possible to get them to do it out of class; good extensive listening materials may be in short supply; a non-native-speaking teacher may not feel confident in his or her ability to compensate for this by talking freely to the class. Fortunately, the internet is making it much easier for learners to obtain interesting and motivating forms of exposure to authentic input, and this is likely to improve language-learning worldwide.

A second reason may be cultural. In countries where the educational tradition favours authoritarian teacher-fronted presentation and a traditional transmission model of education, there is likely to be a strong emphasis on input and a correspondingly reduced emphasis on learner output. And if public self-expression is discouraged, as it is in some cultures, it may be particularly hard to get students to recycle input material creatively in personalised communicative activities. Equally, in strongly rule-governed societies, the rule-based part of language – grammar – tends to be highly valued and to play a dominant role, taking away time from other important components.

Theoretical fashions can also push language teaching towards extreme positions where important components are sidelined or dropped altogether. Contemporary theory is in fact fairly hostile to the kind of intensive input-output work discussed above. The theoretical preference today is emphatically for learner-centred models, with extensive communicative output being highly valued. Intensive output, deliberately reusing what has been taught, is condemned as being unoriginal, not properly communicative, mere 'regurgitation' of other people's language. But teacher-controlled input-output work has a key place in language teaching, alongside other types of activity. You cannot teach by eliciting what is not there, and the best way of making sure that new language is acquired is, very precisely, to give learners other people's language (as we have to – they can't make the language up for themselves) and to help them to make it their own as they use it for personal and creative purposes.

Changes in theoretical or pedagogic fashion often come about because of disillusionment: our teaching doesn't seem to be getting very good results, and the temptation is to drop what we are doing and look for alternatives. But this may not bring about any net gain. If we are doing too much formal input and not enough communicative output, the solution is to balance things up, not to move to a position where we are doing too much communicative output and not enough formal input. This is to act like a man who, feeling cold, puts on a sweater and then takes his trousers off. We need to face the sobering fact that language teaching won't usually get very good results. Languages are hard to learn, and there is never enough time to teach them properly. In particular, the depressing gulf between successful controlled classroom practice and correct spontaneous use – the carry-over problem – will always to some extent be with us. But we can at least optimise our work, so as to get the best results we can under the circumstances. This means, among other things, making sure that our courses have all the key ingredients. We need in particular to beware of miracle solutions, and of packages with labels like 'The X Approach' or 'The Y Method'. Such approaches are nearly always subtractive as well as additive, putting a great deal of emphasis on one or other ingredient of language teaching while neglecting others.

CONCLUSION

I began by claiming that our professional landscape has become very complex, offering a bewildering variety of features for our attention. I have suggested that there are, however, main roads through this complicated terrain. If we keep to these roads most of the time, we will be better placed to make useful side trips to benefit from the many interesting and instructive features that can be found along the way, without getting totally distracted and disoriented as we do so. In this way, we can perhaps not only travel hopefully, but also arrive.

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