

## **WE DO NEED METHODS**

Language teaching is subject to a perennial centrifugal dynamic, whereby a concern with specific aims is easily displaced by a focus on activities which may or may not constitute effective methods of achieving these aims. In recent decades, this tendency has received a powerful boost from communicative teaching theory, with its emphasis on language in use. Attention has also been diverted from the linguistic ‘centre’ by the increasing interest of applied linguistic researchers in matters which are peripheral or ancillary to teaching language itself, and by ‘post-method’ views which tend to discourage concern with questions of methodology. For language teaching to be effective, however, we need to return to the linguistic centre, and to look at methods in terms of their value for solving specific problems, rather than on the basis of their conformity or otherwise with macro-strategic doctrines. Methodological areas which are particularly in need of theoretical attention are those involving the principled selection of high-priority language elements for teaching, and their integration into the overall architecture of language courses: matters which are at present largely the concern of practitioners. The complexity of these operations means that effective full-scale language courses cannot be produced, as is often believed, by teachers working on a do-it-yourself basis. Progress, at least in the short term, may depend as much on our making better use of the methodological resources we already have at our command, as on the development of new technological resources and the expansion of our professional knowledge.

### **1 METHOD, METHODS, POSTMETHOD**

#### **1.1 Introduction: Definitions**

Learning languages is a notoriously complex business, involving the mastery of several different kinds of knowledge and skill. Over the years, language teachers have developed numerous ways of imparting these various aspects of language competence, drawing on research, individual exploration and the accumulated wisdom of the profession. Since learning and competence are difficult to measure, there is inevitably substantial room for differing opinions about the value of one or other method of achieving a particular goal. Such opinions range from the general to the particular. Some claims seem intended to apply to all of the multifarious activities that constitute language instruction: ‘The mother-tongue must never be used in foreign-language teaching’; ‘Learning can only be effective if it involves genuine communication’; ‘Comprehensible input provides all that is necessary for effective acquisition’. Others relate to more specific aspects of a language teacher’s work; for instance the belief that learners need training in reading skills; or that linguistic regularities are best learnt inductively; or that new lexis must always be contextualized; or that teaching phoneme discrimination by the use of minimal pairs helps to improve pronunciation; or that recasts are (or are not) more effective than explicit correction.

Methodological views have been categorized in differing ways by scholars from Anthony (1963) to Richards and Rodgers (2001: 18–34). There is consequently some terminological confusion both in the professional literature and in more general usage as to what it is and is not appropriate to call a ‘method’, and how or whether ‘method’ is to be distinguished from ‘approach’. While it can be helpful to distinguish levels of generality, attempts to establish watertight categories suffer from the usual problem of trying to draw lines on a continuum. In what follows, I shall bypass the problem, using these terms in accordance with normal informal practice without attempting rigorous definitions or distinctions.

#### **1.2 The So-called ‘Postmethod’ Condition**

Discussion of methodology is currently further complicated by the frequently-heard claim that language teaching has moved into a ‘postmethod’ era (e.g. Brown, 2002; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Up till fairly recently, the story goes, there have been successive and often contradictory views about how best to teach languages. These have tended to harden into relatively systematic sets of precepts or ‘methods’, often going into considerable detail about the optimum design of syllabuses, materials and activity types. Such methods have not delivered what they promised, due largely to the limited views of language, teaching and learning which they embodied. Methods are, we are told, top-down and prescriptive. Their efficacy cannot be demonstrated as they are not testable against each other. The role of the individual teacher is minimized. Methods fail to address the broader contexts of language teaching. ‘By concentrating excessively on method, we have ignored several other factors that govern classroom processes and practices – factors such as teacher cognition, learner perception, societal needs, cultural contexts, political exigencies, economic imperatives . . . .’ (Kumaravadivelu, 2006: 165). Autonomy, self-fulfilment and personal development are precluded by an outcome/objectives approach (Finney, 2002: 72). Methods, indeed, may carry (undesirable) sociopolitical agendas (Brown, 2002: 10; Finney, 2002: 71). Now, however, it is claimed, we are freeing ourselves from the constraints of one or other method, and are able to adopt a more open and promising approach to language teaching which can take into account all of the factors – linguistic, psychological and sociological – that shape our activity and that of our learners. Kumaravadivelu (2006: 201) lists ten ‘macrostrategies’ which characterize postmethod language teaching, and from which teachers can generate situation-specific need-based microstrategies or teaching techniques. They are:

1. Maximize learning opportunities
2. Facilitate negotiated interaction
3. Minimize perceptual mismatches
4. Activate intuitive heuristics
5. Foster language awareness
6. Contextualize linguistic input
7. Integrate language skills
8. Promote learner autonomy
9. Ensure social relevance
10. Raise cultural consciousness.

### **1.3 How Method-bound Has Language Teaching Really Been?**

Large-scale methodological views which embody, so to speak, a whole instructional philosophy may certainly impose directions and constraints at a level of considerable detail, so that the whole business of language teaching can be seen as taking on the colour of this or that ‘approach’. The old ‘Direct Method’ requirement that all language teaching should be mediated through the target language caused generations of teachers to go through contortions to avoid translation, and to forbid their students to use bilingual dictionaries (as some still do, discredited though the belief now is). Some teachers and course designers who followed hard-core varieties of the audiolingual approach tried to make as many aspects of their teaching as possible conform to the behaviourist principles of ‘mimicry-memorization’ and ‘overlearning’ through drilling. The fringe methods which became popular in the 1970s, such as Suggestopaedia, Counselling Learning or Silent Way, sometimes required an almost religious type of observance from their devotees. Similarly, some versions of the ‘communicative approach’ have severely discouraged specific teaching activities which are seen as not mirroring ‘real-life’ communication: for example, asking students questions to which the teacher already knows the answer, or practising grammar through decontextualized sentence-level drills. However, I suspect that the ‘postmethod’ account of language teaching history, whereby monolithic

approaches have generally and comprehensively dictated the shape of courses, materials and teaching techniques, may be somewhat over-simplified. It is debatable how far such approaches usually constrain everything that is done. The term ‘grammar-translation’, for instance, which is commonly used as a derogatory label for a certain way of teaching languages, really only characterizes one aspect of classroom activity: dealing with morphology and syntax by teaching explicit rules and making students practise them by translating phrases or sentences. Whatever the drawbacks or inadequacies of this kind of approach, it does not necessarily spill over into other aspects of language learning such as reading or writing practice. This probably goes for any other ‘named’ method, audiolingual, communicative or whatever: as is often clear when one looks at the relevant coursebooks, the philosophical umbrella may in practice cover a good deal of eclecticism. Our familiar view of the succession of approaches that has seemed to characterize the last hundred years or so is perhaps therefore in part a convenient myth. Possibly a more realistic view would be that some parts of some methods have dictated, through syllabus, materials and test design, what some teachers have done, and continue to do, in some parts of their teaching. The successive rejection of one method by another may thus amount, in practice, to the replacement of what does not quite happen by something else that does not quite happen either.

### **1.4 How Postmethod is the Postmethod Condition?**

A brief look at the characterizations of ‘postmethod’ teaching cited above is enough to show, as Bell (2003) makes abundantly clear, that we have not in fact moved into the broad sunlit uplands of a new era, unconstrained by the limiting perspectives of one or other method or approach. Postmethod thinking is not at all methodologically neutral. On the contrary, like its predecessors, it can carry a heavy weight of sociopolitical and educational-philosophical baggage. Kumaravadivelu’s ten ‘macrostrategies’ legislate in favour of negotiated interaction, learner autonomy, intuitive heuristics, social relevance and the raising of cultural consciousness. On the other hand, they have nothing at all to say about, for example, the selection of high-priority linguistic input, the organization of input material into progressive syllabuses, the role of systematic practice in learning, the value of memorization, the need for teachers to have a detailed explicit knowledge of the grammar, phonology and lexis of the languages they are teaching, or many other things that might be regarded by some teachers as centrally important for language teaching.

It is not my purpose here to argue pointlessly for one perspective as against another: both are obviously relevant to our work. In language teaching and learning, there is an eternal and inevitable pendulum-swing backwards and forwards between form and meaning, control and freedom, imitation and expression, knowledge and skill, learning and using. But clearly the ‘postmethod condition’, as described in the citations above, is well towards the meaning- freedom-expression-communication end. In this, it is simply another offshoot of the ‘communicative approach’ of the last 30 years which it is promoted as supplanting, with the same strengths and weaknesses, and with the same empirically unsupported methodological value-judgements and dichotomies (Swan, 1985a, 1985b, 2005). In so far as it is distinguished from other versions of the communicative approach, it is so principally by virtue of its greater focus on socio-political-cultural concerns.

Despite the fine words, then, we are not in anything so grand as a ‘postmethod condition’. What we are in, I would suggest, is a complex centrifugal muddle.

## **2 THE CENTRIFUGAL MUDDLE**

### **2.1 Doing Things and Teaching Things**

In order to teach the forms of the target language, the conventions for their use, and the receptive and productive skills necessary for their effective retrieval and deployment, teachers need interesting and engaging presentation and practice activities. As students learn more language, more general fluency-practice activities also take on increasing importance. Unfortunately, this increased focus on doing things can bring with it a correspondingly reduced focus on the specific knowledge and skills which learners need to acquire and consolidate by means of the activities. Unconsciously, teachers can be drawn into a centrifugal dynamic whereby they move further and further away from the linguistic centre, activities become paramount, and the language the activities are supposed to teach is lost sight of. Doing things is easier, and more fun, than teaching things. Activities such as getting students to prepare a mock radio programme, to give each other lectures on their academic specialities, or to discuss something that is in the news, can seem to be their own justification, with no requirement that there be an identifiable linguistic payoff for the time and energy invested.

Spoken or written texts, in this mind-set, may no longer be seen as vehicles for teaching and consolidating high-priority new language, or promoting receptive fluency. They can simply become a given, there because they are there, to be 'gone through' because that is what language students do, along with answering 'comprehension questions' of uncertain value.

We do not believe that it is necessary for students to understand or translate every word of a reading or listening text. If students complete the task we set – answering a certain number of questions, marking a given number of sentences true or false – we feel that they have read or listened successfully. (Bowler and Parminter, 2002: 59)

The key question, of course, is not whether students 'have read or listened successfully', but what, if anything, they have learnt in the process. Teachers' journals often contain articles on ways of using texts, as if the text was primary and uses had to be found for it. But this is like approaching household repairs by picking up a hammer and wondering what one can do with it, rather than starting by assessing what needs doing and then considering what tools are most appropriate. There seems in fact to be a widespread act of faith that any kind of engagement with texts is bound to teach language. This is by no means necessarily the case.

## 2.2 The Communicative Bias

The centrifugal dynamic has been greatly encouraged in recent decades by theoretical views according to which instructed language learning should attempt to simulate the conditions of 'natural' acquisition, and distance itself from the traditional form-focused teacher-dominated classroom<sup>1</sup>. If exposure to comprehensible input is all that is required for effective language acquisition (Krashen, 1981: 107–108), or if communicative tasks incorporating incidental focus on form provide more or less everything that learners need (Long and Robinson, 1998), then appropriate activities become the central element in language teaching; language itself is no longer at the centre, and 'language-based' teaching methods are misguided (Robinson, 2001: 292). Activity-related concepts that are universally approved of and automatically assented to in this framework – the applied linguistic equivalents of democracy and motherhood – include 'learner-centred', 'meaning-based', 'holistic', 'discourse', 'discovery', 'process', 'interaction', 'negotiation' and 'strategy'. On the other side of the communicative fence, concepts related to 'bad' pedagogic attitudes felt to be discredited and undesirable include 'teacher-dominated', 'form-based', 'discrete', 'sentence-level', 'transmission model', 'product', 'memorization', 'repetition' and 'drill'.

Systematic syllabus-based grammar teaching is naturally disfavoured by this approach; pronunciation has also been elbowed out. Behaviourist-oriented language teaching often incorporated early and systematic study of the phoneme distinctions and suprasegmental features of the target language. Perhaps because it is difficult to make phonological features 'communicative' in any very interesting sense, this kind of work has now largely disappeared. Similarly, communicative

approaches to teaching ‘listening comprehension’, from Blundell and Stokes (1981) to Ellis (2003), typically focus on getting students to extract meaning from texts, rather than on training them to become better at perceiving and decoding the phonetic features – for example difficult consonant clusters, voicing or vowel rounding – that may be making it difficult for them to access the meaning in the first place (Ur, 1984; Field, 1998).

Large numbers of language teachers, particularly those whose training has been influenced by currently fashionable applied linguistic theory, now take the communicative natural acquisition bias for granted.

In the 21st century, it is not necessary to defend the premise that learning a foreign language should be based on a communicative approach which prioritizes meaning over the form in which this meaning is communicated. (Irún-Chavarria, 2005: 20)

But of course it is necessary to defend this premise – and equally necessary to contest it, along with others like it. It is by no means obvious why ‘meaning’ should be prioritized over ‘form’ (whatever that means exactly); or, for example, why learner-directed process should necessarily take precedence over teacher-directed product. Assertions about ‘communicative’ teaching of the kind under discussion are not generally based on empirical evidence as to the efficacy of the teaching approaches they promote (Sheen, 1993, 1994, 2002; Swan, 2005). Such approaches are ideological in nature: they belong to the category which Richards (2002: 21–23) characterizes as based on ‘theory- philosophy conceptions’, views of what ought to work or what is right, what stands to reason, what is self-evident, or what is believed to be psychologically or sociologically desirable.

## 2.3 Other Biases

The centrifugal dynamic is, I believe, fuelled by several additional biases, both academic and practical, which can encourage a focus on activity in classrooms in preference to the study of language itself.

### *The innovation imperative*

Young applied linguists naturally want to carry out original research, publish articles, make their mark and climb the professional ladder. It is certainly possible to do this while investigating the teaching and acquisition of language forms and their uses, and a good deal of distinguished work takes place in this area. But there is perhaps more glory in coming up with exciting findings drawn from a new and unexplored area of research, remote from the central and perhaps intractable-seeming problems that so many researchers have already worked on.

### *The ESL bias*

A further bias may arise from the fact that many of those applied linguists whose views contribute to language teaching theory have typically gained their classroom experience either in second-language situations, where learners have rich exposure to the target language outside the classroom, or at university level in other environments. In both of these situations, learners may benefit from teaching programmes with a heavy emphasis on guided communicative activities, and a correspondingly reduced emphasis on the systematic study of language forms. Unconsciously, writers on language teaching theory can easily extend generalizations which are valid for the situations they are most familiar with to others where these principles are less applicable.

### *The nature of English*

The applied linguistic research and theorizing which form the basis of current thinking and practice relate overwhelmingly to the teaching and learning of English. Now English, as it happens, is a morphologically light language. Although the grammar presents beginners with some syntactic and semantic problems, a good deal of the structure can be picked up easily from exposure and practice. Beginners in English are, then, not faced with a very heavy formal learning load, and can move quickly towards a working knowledge of the language. It is interesting to speculate what current

language-teaching theory would look like if the reference language were, say, Russian. Russian has a formidable array of inflectional grammar, with nouns, verbs, adjectives and pronouns all having a wide range of only partly predictable endings signalling grammatical relations. A beginning or elementary student of Russian has to pay a great deal of attention to these forms if he or she wants a moderate level of grammatical accuracy, they cannot easily be picked up from simple exposure to the limited input available to most students, and there is a powerful case for learning tables of inflections by heart. It is not at all certain that the centrifugal drift from form to activity, or the act of faith whereby forms are taken to be learnable largely by simply using language, would be possible if Russian were the focus of language teaching theory to the extent that English is.

### *Native speaking teachers and grammar*

At a more practical level, a bias away from grammar can arise in the common situation where native speakers of English are involved in teacher training or course design. Such teachers are less likely to have studied the details of English grammar during their training than their non-native speaking counterparts, and some may therefore feel sufficiently insecure about their knowledge to favour approaches which avoid explicit grammar study.

## **2.4 The Expanding Periphery**

I do not of course wish to suggest that theorists, researchers and practitioners no longer have any concern at all with the ‘linguistic centre’. Applied linguistics journals commonly publish articles reporting research on the teaching of at least some aspects of language form; at the more practical end of the scale, teachers’ magazines such as *Modern English Teacher* and *English Teaching Professional* devote considerable space to discussing grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. None the less, it seems clear that there is a real and substantial swing towards a concern, both theoretical and practical, with matters that are ancillary or peripheral to language teaching itself. These include learner characteristics and perceptions, societal needs, cultural contexts, economic imperatives, autonomy, teacher cognition, self-fulfilment and personal development.

While confidence in specific methods has declined, interest in individual learner differences, such as motivation, aptitude, family background, has noticeably increased . . . If what I do in class depends mainly on who I am as a person, then I must develop myself as much as I can if I wish to improve as a teacher. (Sowden, 2007: 304–308)

At the first annual conference of what is now the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (then ATEFL) in 1967, participants discussed the following topics:

- teaching methodology
- the pros and cons of structure drilling and language labs
- ways of improving testing
- how to design teaching programmes for different contexts (especially immigrant education)
- the training of EFL teachers.

At the 40th IATEFL conference in 2006, the titles of talks listed in the programme included references to:

anxiety, CALL, classroom research, collaborative learning, consciousness-raising, critical discourse analysis, critical reading, cultural awareness, developing teacher reflection, 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, professional development, reflective practice, scaffolding, strategy training, teacher’s role.

Among this proliferation of non-central concerns, there are no doubt matters that do require attention. Language teaching is not just teaching language, as Richards and Renandya remind us in their list (2002: 2) of ‘Key issues that shape the design and delivery of [English]

language teaching’:

- understanding learners and their roles, rights, needs, motivations, strategies, and the processes they employ in second language learning
- understanding the nature of language teaching and learning and the roles teachers, teaching methods and teaching materials play in facilitating successful learning
- understanding how English functions in the lives of learners, the way the English language works, the particular difficulties it poses for second language learners, and how learners can best achieve their goals in learning English
- understanding how schools, classrooms, communities, and the language teaching profession can best support the teaching and learning of English.

However, a balance is needed between ancillary concerns and the central language teaching priorities that they are ancillary to. In the limit, communicative or postmethod philosophy can actually seem to be in danger of losing contact with language teaching altogether and replacing it by other things.

Allwright (2003: 114) makes the remarkable statement that according to the principles of ‘exploratory practice’ we should ‘above our concern for instructional efficiency, prioritize the quality of life in the language classroom’. 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).

There is not very much time for language teaching in most instructional situations, and peripheral matters cannot be allowed to divert scarce resources from the teaching of what is more central. Prioritization is important; so (to invoke a non-academic concept) is common sense. The quality of life in the language classroom is not insignificant, but it is certainly not more important than instructional efficiency. To make a virtue of not specifying at all what learners will learn is a very strange approach to the teaching of language, music, mathematics, history or anything else. What a normal teacher does in class surely depends even more on what he/she is teaching than on his or her state of personal development. Language teaching is not only teaching language, but that is its central business. The complexity underlying this deceptively simple-sounding fact is no excuse for substituting ill-directed activity, excessive concern with peripheral topics, or complacent references to a ‘postmethod condition’ for hard thinking about what to teach and how it can best be taught: that is to say, for decisions about method.

### 3 LANGUAGE TEACHING AND THE NEED FOR METHODS

#### 3.1 ‘I don’t know how to say *he had*.’

Macaro (2001: 146) describes a study in which English-speaking secondary school learners of French were being trained in strategy use. At one point in the study one of the children, who was trying to draft a letter to an imaginary French contact, was clearly too overwhelmed by the task to make constructive use of the strategies that might have helped her, failing for instance to attend to part-of-speech information in her dictionary. In any case, strategies did not seem to be her most important gap: at one point in her ordeal she confessed that she could not remember how to say *he had* in French. Now it may well be important and cost-effective to teach selected learning and communication strategies, and there is certainly no reason why a researcher should not investigate their use in whatever situation he or she chooses. But if a pupil who has been learning French for over three years does not know the equivalent of *he had*, there is something wrong, and strategy use is peripheral to the problem. Without knowing more about the individual case, it is impossible to know

exactly what was the source of the child's difficulty. But a reasonable hypothesis, in the light of Macaro's transcripts and what one knows about the approach to foreign language teaching popular in many British schools, is that the girl's class had done a good deal of work on chunk-learning and 'scripts' (describing one's family, home or pets, recounting one's holidays, discussing one's plans for the future, writing an introductory letter to a penfriend, etc.), but had done relatively little work on fundamental grammar. That is to say, the teaching is likely to have used one and the same kind of activity both for fostering fluent use of what was known, and for building up basic knowledge. Not surprisingly, the method worked better for one than the other.

The main problem with large-scale language teaching approaches ('methods' in the wider sense) is not, it seems to me, that they fail to take into account the complex nature of society, culture, human psychology or interpersonal relations. It is that they do not take into account the complexity of language itself. Discussion of methods can only be really constructive if given a tighter focus, looking at separate aspects of language and asking for each 'how can this best be taught?' Just as one can talk about good and bad ways of putting a hinge on a door, organizing a tennis tournament or training a sheepdog, one can talk about good and bad ways of teaching German technical vocabulary, demonstrating Chinese tones, introducing English question formation to beginners, organizing role play in groups, planning a three-week intensive Spanish course for tourist guides, or indeed teaching the French for *he had*. Language is very many different things, very many different types of activity are involved in learning and teaching it, and considerations of method are relevant to all of these. Teachers, where they are not too influenced by theoretical fashion, are of course generally well aware of this; few teachers seem persuaded that methods are dead (Thornbury, 1998; Block, 2001; Bell, 2007).

### 3.2 The Components of Language Instruction

Any course of language instruction must provide the learner with an appropriate knowledge and skills base. This necessarily means addressing four problems:

- *selection and presentation* The language elements that learners most need must be identified and made available for learning.
- *establishment of a knowledge base* The forms and use of these elements must be fixed in learners' long-term memory.
- *development of recall and deployment* New material, once learnt, must become efficiently retrievable for comprehension or production. Where language use involves not only recall but also computation (for example applying a morphological or syntactic rule, matching a grammatical form to a meaning or situation), learners must acquire the ability to perform the operations required with reasonable accuracy in real time.
- *architecture* The syllabus components – the different language elements and skills selected for teaching – need to be fitted together into a coherent smoothly functioning package: a course. This must link different elements together efficiently and economically, while exploiting the interpersonal dynamics of the instructional situation to the best advantage, and allowing for adaptation and variation in the light of individual differences and local conditions.

In each of these areas, questions of method arise at various scales. How can we best select material for learning, by identifying both the highest-priority forms, and the most important functions, notions and skills for which appropriate forms must be taught? (These are not the same question; they are two different questions with complementary answers: see Swan, 1985b: 79.) For each language element that we have identified, what is the most appropriate presentation vehicle, and how can this element best be fixed in long-term memory and made efficiently retrievable and available for fluent use?

What principles are relevant to linking items of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation into packages (lessons) and deciding what kinds of activity will at the same time teach these items and practise more general skills? How can we provide adequate opportunity for realistic communicative



practice of the different kinds of thing that have been learnt? Does a given skill need to be taught, or will learners access it naturally in due course by virtue of already being able to deploy it in their mother tongues (Walter, 2007)? What can best be learnt through extensive reading or listening, what through intensive input, and what through analysed (form-focused) input? What is most usefully presented or practised in a whole-class format, what is better handled through group work, and what lends itself best to individual study? Do learners have easy access to extensive input, and if not, how do we provide it? What can be learnt outside the instructional situation, and by what routes? What cannot? What can be learnt through discovery and what is more efficiently taught by more directive methods?

For the central formal aspects of language, questions of method may need to be considered virtually on an item-specific basis. Definition, paraphrase, contextualization, illustration, mime and translation are all viable vocabulary-teaching strategies; but they would not all be equally effective for teaching each of the lexical items *thanks, elephant, solution, curly, in principle, mortgage, jump, hang on* and *gearbox*. The same applies to grammar. How you can best teach a point – and indeed whether you need to teach it, or can teach it – depends very much on what you are teaching. Japanese question formation? The position of French object pronouns? Spanish tense use? English noun compounding? Russian noun morphology? In Hulstijn's words (1995): 'Not all grammar rules are equal'.

### 3.3 'Method' is an Obstacle to Methods

Questions of this kind, then, cannot be answered by reference to the kind of sweeping generalization that often dictates methodological stances, and such generalizations can in fact seriously hamper what we are doing. 'Method' can get in the way of methods. Of course, we need to pay attention to what theory and research have to tell us about learning, language acquisition, social behaviour and so on. But from an ideological point of view, language-teaching methodology is, and must be allowed to be, neutral. If we wish to decide whether language laboratory-type pattern repetition will help Mandarin speakers to master English conditional structures, we cannot settle the question by appealing to current views on behaviourism; we must try it and see what happens. The same goes for such activities as practising French rounded vowels in front of a mirror, committing to memory a table of Polish case-endings, learning a bilingual vocabulary list, translating a foreign text into one's own language and back, filling gaps in sentences or mining a corpus for authentic usage examples. These may or may not be useful things to do, but the issue cannot be decided on the basis of their conformity with current views about, for instance, the importance for learning of interaction and meaningful communication. Such views may well be relevant to some aspects of language teaching and learning; for other aspects, they are not necessarily any more applicable than they are to teaching learner drivers to reverse into parking spaces, training novice skiers to execute snow-plough turns, or showing mathematics students how to solve simultaneous equations. Interaction with other learners in a controlled role-play task may be an excellent way of increasing one's fluent command of a particular range of speech functions, and an extremely inefficient way of mastering the grammar of relative clauses. The same goes for learner-directed work or 'learning to learn': these approaches work for some things and not for others. Sentence-level grammar practice (to take one of the activities instanced above) is condemned by many scholars on the grounds that it isolates structural elements from their use in 'discourse': the larger-scale structuring of language for effective communication (see for example Celce-Murcia, 2007). But discourse is not some kind of absolute value to which homage must always be paid. Some grammar is discourse-oriented (for example Italian word order); much of it is not (for example the use of a dative case after the German equivalent of *to help*, or the syntax of English questions). And in general, the fact that grammatical knowledge needs to be integrated into fluent communicative production does not mean that there is no place for less meaning-focused teaching activities. 'What we need is an appropriate balance

between exercises that help learners come to grips with grammatical forms, and tasks for exploring the use of those forms to communicate effectively' (Nunan, 1998: 109).

This rejection of ideological stances is not just a matter of principle. In many areas it has solid empirical justification. Despite the standard condemnation of 'traditional' approaches in much academic writing about second language acquisition, there is persuasive evidence, as Sheen reminds us (1993, 1994, 2002), for the superiority of 'traditional' against 'communicative' approaches for some aspects of language teaching. Consciously repeating learnt material in practice activities is condemned for instance by Robinson (2001: 291) and Skehan (1998:123), who calls it 'regurgitating'. But as Tomasello (2003: 66) points out, we have good research evidence for the importance of repetitive and scripted exchanges for mother-tongue vocabulary learning, and it is at least highly plausible (Cook, 2000; Swan, 2006) that such activities play an equally essential part in L2 learning. Similarly, translation has been shown to aid vocabulary learning (Ramachandran and Rahim, 2004; Folse, 2004), despite its general rejection as a teaching technique by successive methodological doctrines.

### **3.4 Syllabus Content and Design: The Theory–Practice Gap**

The methodological area where contemporary theorists and practitioners diverge most, it seems to me, is that defined by the first and fourth of the problems listed at the beginning of Section 6.3.2: the selection of language elements for teaching, and their integration into courses. Since languages are vast, and time for learning them is usually very limited, the principled selection of input material is crucial. An hour spent learning low-priority words, structures, pronunciation features or skills is an hour that is not available for other more urgent matters. At different times in the last hundred years or so, language teaching theory has therefore concerned itself with one or other aspect of selection. Word frequency, grammatical structures, pronunciation, situational language, speech functions and their exponents, skills, strategies and discourse structure have all received considerable attention. Unfortunately, focus on one element has often entailed lack of concern for others. My first German textbook (a reprint of a very old course) made a reasonable job of sequencing the structures of the language, but vocabulary selection was subordinated to the exigencies of a plot-line based on German mythology: one of the first nouns I learnt was *der Greif*: 'the gryphon'. Vocabulary selection based on frequency counts came in later, to the considerable benefit of language teaching, as did a rather short-lived concern with the systematic teaching of phonology. Communicative approaches to syllabus design brought language functions into focus at the expense of language forms: Munby's exhaustive work on needs analysis (1978) does not have an index entry for 'grammar'. Systematic vocabulary selection has been given a renewed boost in recent years with the explosion of corpus-based research: Willis (1990: vi) stresses that satisfactory lexical coverage in language teaching can only be ensured with the aid of a frequency-informed lexical syllabus. Currently, however, as ever, there appears to be little concern by theorists in general to survey synoptically the various areas where selection might be relevant. Indeed, much recent academic writing on instructed language acquisition simply has nothing to say about the principles involved in the pedagogical selection of central language elements of any kind. Brown's list of 12 principles on which 'viable current approaches to language teaching are based' (2002: 12–13) says nothing whatever about the selection of material. An interesting exception to the general pattern is Ellis (2006: 87–88), who offers detailed, if incomplete, criteria for the selection of grammar points for teaching, while however making the bizarre claim that course-book writers and the authors of grammar practice materials are unaware of these criteria and 'try to teach the whole of the grammar'.

The present relative lack of concern, at an academic level, for selection criteria is accompanied by a similar failure to address the overall design of teaching programmes. While there has been a good deal of discussion of syllabus types over the last two or three decades, this has rarely extended to the consideration of what I have called course architecture. This is, however, a crucial matter. When

language elements have been chosen for presentation and practice, they are not usually presented in an isolated fashion one by one; it is generally considered desirable to integrate them. So, for instance, a course writer might (1) create, edit or reproduce a reading text – let us say a narrative, while (2) ensuring that it contained both high-priority vocabulary and selected structures – for instance past progressives, and/or descriptive and defining noun phrase structures, and at the same time (3) building in work on a pronunciation point – the weak pronunciation of *was/were* would fit in well here. Learners would study the text, work on the elements presented in it by means of various types of controlled and free practice activity, and perhaps finish the input–output cycle by using the new language to write a similar kind of narrative themselves. A typical mainstream language course for use in class is built up, as everyone knows, of successive units of this kind together with testing and revision material, commonly packaged into a student’s book, teacher’s book, workbook and set of recordings. Producing such material – interweaving different syllabus components into the complex architecture of a language course – is a highly skilled activity to which a number of theoretical issues are relevant. In other words, there must be such a thing as a theory of language course construction. It is, however, hard to locate such a theory: discussion in this area is not common in the applied linguistics literature. While there are certainly exceptions (e.g. Tomlinson, 2003; Cook, 2008; Johnson, 2008), it does seem as if the design principles of language courses are not a matter for widespread academic attention. A typical paper on the role of materials in the language class- room (Crawford, 2002), for instance, makes no mention at all of the textbook as a selection and presentation vehicle.

There are millions of language learners in the world. Most of these learners follow syllabuses that are instantiated in courses. The courses are created by experienced professionals who typically spend years at the job, and who build on a developing tradition established by their predecessors over centuries. And yet it seems as if these thousands of creative practitioners, perhaps because they do not often contribute to learned journals, are effectively invisible in the academic world – although names such as Alexander, O’Neill, Abbs, Freebairn or Soars have probably become known to more people worldwide, with good reason, than those of almost any contemporary novelist. There is an excellent collection of important papers on cognition and second language instruction (Robinson (ed.), 2001) in which many of the authors, in the nature of things, touch on language syllabus design. The bibliography at the end of the book contains 1,025 references; writers cited include two evolutionary biologists and two philosophers of science. Six of the 1,025 references are to work by language-teaching practitioners; none of the six is a course designer. It is true that the papers are at a theoretical level some distance removed from the classroom. But it would be odd to find a collection of essays on, say, the neurophysiological basis for learning and playing the piano, which (a) recommended new approaches, and (b) did not mention a single practising pianist. Are the principles underlying the work of practising course designers really not worth the attention of those scholars who specialize in the theory of instructed language acquisition?

### **3.5 Home-made Materials**

The perennial lack of concern for the work of course designers is reinforced by a widespread contemporary belief that language courses can be produced on a ‘do it yourself’ basis. Allwright (1981) criticizes published materials for making decisions that, in his view, could be made by the teacher and/or students; the idea that syllabuses should be negotiated between teachers and learners is a commonplace of communicative and postmethod thinking; it is clear from internet discussion forums such as the *TESL-L* list that many teachers feel that they can provide better courses for their students than are available between the covers of published textbooks.

It is certainly true that, where students have limited and closely defined needs (for example for fluency practice or special-purpose vocabulary), hard-working and gifted teachers may be able to

provide materials or activities which are better attuned to their students than any externally-produced course can hope to be. However, in the more typical situation where students need a general course which will teach them all the highest-priority elements of a new language, matters are very different. To put together a cost-effective full-scale language course with adequate coverage, a materials writer needs a great deal of specialist linguistic and pedagogic knowledge, together with access to reliable inventories, graded by frequency and usefulness, of vocabulary items, structures, functions and notions (and their exponents), situational language, discourse features, and any number of other things. The work of selecting language elements for teaching and incorporating them into appropriate presentation material, described above, is enormously time-consuming, and can take up to two years' full-time work for one level of a course. The notion that a teacher, or a teacher and students acting in concert, can somehow substitute for this in their spare time, is quite unrealistic. Course production is a specialist activity drawing on quite different skills from those that are required for teaching. To expect the average working teacher, however gifted, to write a viable general language course is like expecting the first violinist to compose the whole of the orchestra's repertoire in his or her evenings off.

#### **4 THE FUTURE**

How can we expect language-teaching methodology to develop in the future? Obviously all that we can sensibly say is that we don't know. Two things, however, seem to me to be reasonably certain. One is that we will make progress. Just as we have made very considerable improvements over the last half century, we can expect to make further advances as we benefit from technological innovations, and as we find out more about language and how it is learnt. Textbook-based classroom learning is likely to be at least partly superseded by far more flexible and varied approaches to the delivery and practice of the elements of a foreign language, to our considerable benefit. What also seems certain, however, is that progress, though real, will never be spectacular. Foreign languages are very hard for most people to learn well after childhood, and they will continue to be hard. There are no miracle methods waiting to be discovered.

Progress is likely to be faster if we are able to remove some of the obstacles that we have allowed to stand in our way. Repeatedly disillusioned by our failure to bring students close to a native-speaker level of accuracy, we have been all too ready to throw out the methods we have been using, like a bewildered dictatorship executing its minister of agriculture because of the collapse of yet another unworkable five-year plan. In replacing old methods by new ones, we have often allowed new and promising-looking macrostrategical stances to dictate our acceptance or rejection of micromethods, whose value should in fact be judged solely by their efficacy. And in recent years we have allowed our interest in learner-centred, naturalistic, activity-based learning to fill much of the horizon, so that teaching language has all too easily been replaced by doing things with it.

I believe that quite substantial progress in most language teaching environments would be possible immediately, simply by making more intelligent use of all the resources we have at our disposal. It seems to me that our knowledge of both formal and functional aspects of language, our growing understanding of acquisitional processes, and the vast range of methodology and materials that we have developed over the last century or so, provide all the necessary ingredients for a balanced and effective model of instructed second- language learning. What we need, perhaps, is therefore not so much to find new methods, as to take stock of the existing ones and integrate them into more ideologically neutral and comprehensive approaches.

#### **5 CONCLUSION: A PLEA FOR COMMON SENSE**

Common sense is an unreliable faculty with no scientific standing. There are, however, times when it can usefully be appealed to. In the face of some of the more extravagant methodological views which are currently in the air, we need perhaps to bring our feet back into contact with the ground. I have always felt that language teaching theorists would do well to consider how they would respond themselves to the kind of methodology that they recommend. Speaking purely for myself, if I imagine (to take one common type of language-learning context among many) that I have just enrolled in a London school for a beginners' course in, say, Hungarian:

- I do not wish to negotiate with the teacher in order to decide what aspects of a language about which I know little it is or is not useful for me to learn. If I hire a guide to take me up Mont Blanc, I do not expect him or her to consult me about the route.
- I do not want to be taught reading skills. I have reading skills. What I want is some Hungarian to deploy them on.
- I do not want to work out Hungarian grammar for myself. Trying to establish the regularities underlying examples of usage is difficult and time-consuming, with no guarantee of success, even in one's first language. I know: this is one of the things I do for a living.
- Nor do I want to learn Hungarian grammar by 'negotiating meaning' with other beginners.
- I am not receptive to the idea that I can pick up complexities such as the Hungarian definite and indefinite tense inflection system by incidental focus on form during communicative activity. My previous language learning experience suggests that this is unlikely.
- I do not want to be deprived of information about the grammar until I reach intermediate level, as advised for example by Ellis (2003: 32).
- I do not want to learn by working on texts and activities that the teacher has devised in his/her spare time. These might well reflect my interests and those of the other students to perfection, but the chance of their also providing well-planned coverage of high-priority Hungarian forms and their functions is remote.
- I do not want concern with my 'identity'. If the teacher remembers my name, keeps track of my progress and has some sense of my strengths and weaknesses as a learner and a linguist, that will do very well.
- If I want self-fulfilment, I will not go to a language classroom; I can think of much better places. Nor do I want my personality developed. For better or worse, my personality is probably about as developed as it is going to be. In any case, if I thought improvement was possible, I would go to a specialist in these matters, not to a language teacher. I don't ask a hairdresser to fix my central heating.
- In short, I do not wish to be told that I should be happy to substitute process for product. Product is exactly what I want: a working knowledge of Hungarian, delivered in a focused and cost-effective way by the methods most appropriate to provide it.

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<sup>1</sup> I feel impelled to point out, if only in a spirit of mischief, that the two strands of this ideological stance run in opposite directions. If instructed language learning is to be a socially egalitarian, learner- directed matter, liberated from the authority of the traditional directive teacher figure, then it cannot also proceed according to the principles of ‘natural’ first language acquisition, since first language learners (babies) are in a situation that is anything but egalitarian and authority-free. You can have one or the other, not both.