

THE BIG GREY BOOK

For about six weeks, in 1962 or thereabouts, I knew exactly how it all worked. After a couple of years as an untrained part-time teacher struggling through the convoluted wasteland of English grammar and the trackless jungle of language-teaching methodology, I suddenly found a book. It was a big grey book called 'Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language', or something similar, and it was written by C C Fries, an American linguist working in the behaviourist tradition of the time. As I devoured it from cover to cover, I discovered wonderful things: language was basically a set of habits; a second language was a new set of habits; mistakes came from old habits interfering with new ones; these could be cured by 'overlearning' through lots of quick-fire mechanical structure drills; if you got the grammar right the vocabulary could just be slotted in, no problem; and many other revelations that I have now forgotten.

My eyes shining with the demented zeal of the recent convert, I started giving big grey lessons. We practised structures till we all fell over. The students found out the connection between the two meanings of *drill* as they developed holes in their brains. The activities skilfully combined ineffectiveness and boredom, qualities that today's language-teaching generally manages to keep separate. And yet a strange thing happened: my passion communicated itself to the students. They loved it all, and made tremendous progress. They wanted to learn, I was convinced I knew how they should learn, and somehow we were all free to progress towards the end of the rainbow, unburdened by doubt.

Language teaching moved on, and so did I. The American structuralist panacea shuffled off into the sunset, leaving behind a modest legacy of useful insights and techniques. I became better informed, more eclectic and more uncertain, and began teaching somewhat less well by much better methods.

Since then I have often enough seen teachers in the grip of some extremist doctrine: insanely refusing, for example, to allow their students to see the written word for the first eighteen weeks; doing nothing but grammar, nothing but vocabulary or nothing but fluency practice; teaching by eliciting what isn't there; approaching English via psychotherapy; strapping their students in armchairs and playing them relaxing music all day; submitting them to the linguistic lottery of the hard-core task-based syllabus; teaching exclusively through CLL, TPR, ZZZ or some other acronym-of-the-day method. And, while feeling generally that teachers get better results if they do something sensible, I have tried to remind myself that faith can come close to working miracles, and to remember how well I taught when I was teaching so badly, back in the days when I knew exactly how it was all done, thanks to the big grey book. C C Fries – I miss you.