Chapter 4

Popular Methodology

Linguistics (ELT) – 4th year – 2nd term / Lecture 9

Criticism:

Critics of TBL have raised a number of concerns about its over all applicability.

Some examples: (for more details read page 73)

- Paul Seedhouse suggests that while it may be highly appropriate to base some learning on tasks, it would be 'unsound' to make tasks 'the basis for an entire pedagogical methodology' (Seedhouse 1999: 155).

He points out that the kind of interaction which typical tasks promote leads to the use of specific 'task-solving' linguistic forms. These fail to include the kind oflanguage we might expect from discussion, debate or social interactions of other kinds.

- Michael Swan worries that 'while TBI may successfully develop learners' command of what is known, it is considerably less effective for the systematic teaching of new language' (2005b: 376).

He also worries about how appropriate tasks are in a situation where teachers have little time.

- Similarly, Penny Ur, working in a state school with only three or four English lessons a week, states that she has to 'make sure they learn the most common and useful words and chunks as fast as possible. We don't have time to wait until such items are encountered in communicative tasks' (2006).

However, she does not argue that there is no place for communicative tasks, but rather that they are a 'necessary added component of a structured, language-based syllabus and methodology' (2006: 3).

- A central claim of TBL is that 'opportunities for production may force students to pay close attention to **form** and to the **relationship between form and meaning'.** However, Rob Batstone wonders whether tasks which require simultaneous processing of **form and meaning** might 'overload the learner's system, leading to less intake rather than more' (1996: 273).

Conclusion

- In its pure form (**that a curriculum should be based on tasks, and that learning should emerge from the tasks rather than preceding them**), TBL accurately reflects an approach to learning exemplified by proponents of **focus-on-form**, rather than those who base their curriculum on teaching a **sequence of pre-selected forms.**

- It is indubitably the case that having students perform meaning-related tasks is good for language processing and for giving them opportunities for trying out language (and getting feedback on their language use), but whether a programme based exclusively on such tasks is appropriate (and where it might be appropriate) is open to question.

A7 The Lexical Approach

- The lexical approach is based on the assertion that 'language consists not of traditional grammar and vocabulary but often of **multi-word prefabricated chunks**' (Lewis 1997: 3). These are the ‘lexical phrases', 'lexical chunks' and other word combinations (i.e. the collocations, idioms, fixed and semi-fixed phrases) which form such an important part of the language.
- Adult language users have literally thousands of these chunks at their disposal, such as *How are you?, See you later, You must be joking, I'll give it my best shot, changing the subject slightly ..., might as well, ... if it'll help.*
- Lewis proposes that fluency is the result of acquisition of a large store of these fixed and semi-fixed pre-fabricated items which are ‘available as the foundation for any linguistic novelty or creativity' (1997: 15).

- A Lexical approach would steer us away from an over-concentration on syntax and tense usage (with Vocabulary slotted into these grammar patterns) towards the teaching of **phrases which show words in combination**, and which are generative in a different way from traditional grammar substitution tables.

- Thus, instead of teaching ***will*** for the future, we might instead have students focus on its use in a series of 'archetypical utterances', such as *I'll give you a ring, I'll be in touch, I'll see what I can do, I'll be back in a minute*, etc.

- Typical activities include asking students to add intensifiers to semi-fixed expressions, e.g. *Its obvious something's gone wrong (quite)*, and getting students, once they have read a text, to underline all the nouns they can find and then to underline any verbs that **collocate** with those nouns. Word-order exercises can be adapted to focus on particular phrase components, as in this example for expressions with ***get:***

Rearrange these to make fixed expressions with the verb *(get)*.

1. Things much can't worse get.
2. What we to there are supposed time get?
3. I you the very weren't happy impression got.
4. We've we as as the for can far moment got.
5. We be to don't anywhere seem getting.
6. What you I can get?

Which of these suggests:

flying **offering a drink** **frustration** **despair**

'Sentence anagrams' from *Implementing the Lexical Approach* by M Lewis (Language Teaching Publications)

- Lewis suggests that exposure to enough suitable input, not formal teaching, is the 'key to increasing the learner's lexicon', and that 'most vocabulary is **acquired**, not taught' (1997: 197).

Reservations:

- Suggesting that language should be taught in such a Lexical approach is not without problems.
- In the first place, no one has yet explained how the learning of fixed and semi-fixed phrases can be incorporated into the understanding of a language system.
- Another problem is determining the way in which we might order such phrases for teaching and learning purposes.
- There are as yet no sets of procedures to exemplify such an approach to language learning.
- The lexical approach doesn’t have a set of pedagogic principles or syllabus specifications which could be incorporated into a method.

AB Teachers and students in dialogue together

- In 1995, Scott Thornbury suggested that ELT needed a return to a materials- and technology-free classroom in which language emerges as teachers and students engage in a dialogic relationship.

- A group of teacher emerged who reasoned that language is co-constructed between teachers and students, where it **emerges** (as it is scaffolded by the teacher) rather than being **acquired**. They were hostile to materials being brought into the classroom since these interfered with the dialogic relationship between teacher and student.

- In this return to a '**pedagogy of bare essentials**' students learn because they get to express what they want to say - rather like the consumers of Community language learning (see page 68) - instead of taking their cue from coursebooks and school syllabuses.

- **Critics** of this line of reasoning point out that this kind of dialogic model favours native-speaker teachers, that it is extremely difficult to countenance in large classes, that syllabuses are necessary organising constructs, and that materials such as coursebooks, in particular, are highly prized by both teachers and students alike for a variety of reasons.

- Nevertheless, we need to think carefully about our role as teachers, and about how an over-reliance on focus-on-forms, based on over-used materials, may stifle the creativity of both teacher and students.

B What methodology?

- The writer Adrian Holliday has come up with the term ***native speakerism*** to describe the way that British and American teaching methodology and practices have been exported around the world, almost without question by the exporters, though they are increasingly questioned by commentators, both native speaker and non-nati.ve speaker alike.

- Holliday's worry about native speakerism is that it is often premised on a view of 'us' and 'them'. Native speakerism, he worries, 'cuts into and divides World TESOL by creating a negatively reduced image of the foreign Other of non-native speaker students and educators'.

- Many years ago, Dilys Thorp wrote an article that identifies a problem which occurs when different educational cultures come into contact with each other. (see example on page 76)

- ’It is far too easy, she writes, 'to think that our own ideas as to what constitutes "good" learning are universal, and forget their cultural specificity' (1991: 117).

- The fact is that many of the approaches and teaching methods we have discussed in this chapter are based on a very western idea of what constitutes 'good' learning.

- **For example**, we have expected active participation in class, and we have encouraged adventurous students who are prepared to have a go even when they are not completely sure of the language they are trying to use. We sometimes ask students to talk about themselves and their lives in a potentially revealing way. We tell students that they should take charge of their learning, that the teacher is a helper and guide rather than the source of knowledge and authority.

- Yet all of these tenets may well fly in the face of educational traditions from different cultures. Thus British and American teachers working in other countries sometimes complain that their students have 'nothing to say', when in fact it is not an issue of the students' intelligence, knowledge or creativity which makes them reluctant to communicate in a British or American way, but their **educational culture**.

- If teachers (native or non-native speakers) grounded in English-speaking western TESOL assume a methodological superiority (and as a result perceive other kinds of learning as inherently inferior), they will be doing their students and themselves a potential disservice.

- Our attitudes to the language, and to the way it is taught, reflect cultural biases and beliefs about how we should communicate and how we should educate each other.

- When teachers from one culture (e.g. Britain, the USA, Australia) teach students from another (e.g. Cambodia, Argentina, Saudi Arabia), it is often easy to see where cultural and educational differences reside. However, it is the **methodological culture** that matters here, not the background of the teachers themselves. (see the example of the Argentinian teacher page 77)

- The teacher (Pablo Toledo) in that example argues that ideas developed in 'comfy little schools with highly motivated students' just aren't right for less 'privileged' contexts. 'Not; he writes, 'because there is something wrong with the ideas, but they just were not made for our teaching reality, and do not deal with our problems.'

Conclusion

All we are saying here is that applying a particular methodology thoughtlessly to any and every learning context we come into contact with may not always be appropriate. What we need to ask ourselves, therefore, is how to decide what is appropriate, and how to apply the methodological beliefs that guide our teaching practice.

B2 Bargains, postmethodand context-sensitivity

Bargains

One approach for context-sensitive teachers is to try to **create a bridge between their methodological beliefs and the students' preferences.**

For example, Dilys Thorp had what she saw as a problem with students in China when they were confronted with listening tasks. An important skill for students is listening for gist (general understanding) without getting hung up on the meaning of every single word. Yet Thorp's students were not used to this idea; they wanted to be able to listen to tapes again and again, translating word for word. It is worth quoting her response to this situation in full:

In listening, where they needed the skill of listening for gist and not every word, and where they wanted to listen time and time again, we gradually weaned them away from this by initially allowing them to listen as often as they liked; but in return – and this was their part of the bargain – they were to concentrate on the gist and answer guided questions. These guided questions moved them away from a sentence-by-sentence analysis towards inferential interpretation of the text. Then, we gradually reduced the number of times they were allowed to listen. This seemed to work: it was a system with which they were happy, and which enabled them to see real improvements in their listening skills.

(Thorp 1991: 115)

- Thorp's solution was to make a bargain so that two essentially opposing methodological beliefs could be accommodated together as a result of negotiation between teacher and students.

Postmethod

- A more radical suggestion is that we have reached a **'postmethod' phase**. looked at this way, taking a method into class (say Task-based learning), is actually limiting since it gets in the way of teachers and students learning how to learn together.

- What is needed, Kumaravadivelu (2006) suggests, is not alternative methods, but **'an alternative to method'**. lnstead of one method, he suggests ten 'macrostrategies, such as "maximise learning opportunities, facilitate negotiation, foster language awareness, promote learner autonomy" etc.' . Of course, these aims represent a kind of methodological **'wishlist'**, and while not confined to a one-size-fits-all restrictive methodology, nevertheless make methodological assumptions which might, without reflection and negotiation, be inappropriate (as inappropriate as some of the practices Pablo Toledo 'howled' about (see page 77)).

- **Dick Allwright** is also concerned to get away from methods as the central focus of decisions about teaching. For him, the **quality of life in any classroom** is much more important than instructional efficiency.

- In what he calls ***exploratory practice*** (2003), teachers should determine and understand the classroom quality of life. Then they should identify a **learning puzzle** (find something that is puzzling in class - e.g. why certain things happen or don't happen when teaching students), reflect on it, gather data and try out different ways of solving the puzzle, reflecting at each stage on what happens in order to decide what to do next. (This is called **reflective teaching**, which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 24).

- **Stephen Bax** (2003; 2006) has similar concerns about the imposition of a method without taking the **context** where the learning is happening into account.
- He points out that methodology is just one factor in language learning. Other factors may be important, and other methods and approaches may be equally valid.
- His solution is for teachers to do some kind of '**context analysis**' before they start teaching so that they can develop their own procedures from the range of methodological knowledge and techniques they have available to them. They then **reflect on** and **evaluate** what has happened in order to decide how to proceed.

B3 Making choices

- We need to be able to say, as Kumaravadivelu attempted, what is important in methodological terms', especially if we concede that a choice of one method alone may not be right in many situations.

- We have to be able to extract the **key components** of the various methods we have been describing. **What is it that students need**, and **what should we offer them?**

- Six strands have emerged from our discussion in this and in the previous chapter (3):

- **Affect:** students learn better when they are engaged with what is happening. Their feelings and attitudes matter both in relation to their encounters with the language itself, and also in terms of the learning experience in general.

- **Input:** students need constant exposure to the language otherwise they will not learn how to use it. The input they receive may be in the form of reading or in the way the teacher talks to them. It may sometimes be roughly-tuned (see page 50) or, for more form-focused sequences, finely-tuned. Comprehensible input is not enough in itself, unless there is some language study or some opportunity for noticing or consciousness-raising to help students remember specific language. Focus on form – and especially at lower levels, on language forms – is a vital component of successful language learning.

- **Output:** students need chances to activate their language knowledge through meaning-focused tasks. This activation is achieved when they try to deploy all or any of the language they know either to produce language (spoken or written) or to read or listen for meaning.
- **Cognitive effort:** students should be encouraged to think about language as they work with it since, we are sure, this aids retention. Where appropriate, we should encourage students to do some of the work for themselves, discovering how language works rather than being given information about language construction 'on a plate'.
- **Grammar and lexis:** lexis is as important as grammar. Showing how words combine together and behave both semantically and grammatically is an important part of any language-learning programme.
- **How, why and where:** the actual way we do things depends not on the choice of a method (though it is possible that a method – or a version of a method – may be appropriate), but rather on why and where we are teaching. What do we want to achieve, with whom and in what context? We need to analyse these features and then choose from the procedures and techniques at our command those that best fit the situation we are in. At all levels and at all stages of teaching we should be able to say clearly why we are doing what we are doing – an issue we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 21.

End of Dr. Amani Fakhra's part

Good Luck