



METHODS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Frameworks and Options

Waldemar Marton

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WALDEMAR MARTON

*Adam Mickiewicz University,
Poznań, Poland*

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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To my wife Krystyna

Preface

Much can be learned about attitudes to language teaching and learning by examining the metaphors in terms of which this pedagogic and personal process is described. For a generation of teachers and learners the prevailing metaphor was that of ‘rule’. Language was ‘rule-governed’ and, in consequence, teaching and learning needed to be regulated activities: the process was in harmony with the object. This reflection in practice of our perceptions of the object has not changed: only the metaphor has. We now speak of ‘strategy’: communication is strategic use of language. In a similar (but ultimately confusing) way, learning is also ‘strategic’ – learners make use of their strategies to solve the communicative problems that they face. Unfortunately, it is by no means clear that this nowadays rather overworked term can do, on its own, for *teaching* (strategy), *learning* (strategy) and *communicating* (strategy). We need to unpack and clarify the metaphors.

This Waldemar Marton admirably does in this recent contribution to the *Language Teaching Methodology Series*. He identifies four teaching strategies, each of which interrelates with the others to provide a comprehensive description of the available modes of instruction required by the language teacher. These teaching strategies in turn highlight particular classroom procedures. Each has, then, its pedagogic consequence. These procedures invoke particular cognitive processes in the learner, all of which contribute to his or her learning strategy. The object of these procedures and these processes is the enhancing of the learner’s communicative competence, his or her strategies of communication. In this way, ‘methods’ are not just tricks for teaching, but clearly outlined principles on which a language teaching curriculum can be soundly based, connecting instruction with learning and both with the learner’s growing capacity to make himself or herself understood in the foreign language.

CHRISTOPHER N. CANDLIN
General Editor

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Finally, but not least importantly, I am greatly indebted to my wife for her moral support, for typing of the manuscript, and for shouldering even more than her usual share of household chores and duties during the writing of this book.

Introduction

This book is to a large extent a result of my experience and my professional career. When, in 1968, I took up my present position as head of the teacher-training programme at the Institute of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, the whole teaching profession was in a state of confusion and uncertainty caused by the demise of the audiolingual method, which only some years before was still universally believed to be the first language teaching theory based on solid scientific foundations. Faced with the dilemma of what to tell my students and what teaching philosophy to base my programme on, I came to the conclusion that scholarly honesty was the best policy and, instead of feeding them any ready-made pedagogical recipes, it was better to demonstrate to them that there was actually none. I believed that my essential duty was to discuss every important issue in language learning and teaching as impartially and objectively as possible, pointing at the same time to the impossibility of finding sure answers and easy solutions. I also believed that this kind of approach was the best preparation for the formation of creative and enlightened teachers who, on the basis of the knowledge provided by the programme and after gaining some practical experience, would be able to construct their own teaching theory. This attitude is still shared today by many language educators and teacher trainers. Some years ago H. Douglas Brown, addressing the practising teacher, expressed an act of faith in his theory-building ability in the following words:

Using a cautious, enlightened, eclectic approach, you can build a theory – an understanding of the principles of second language learning and teaching. [Brown, 1980 : 14]

Unfortunately, it soon became apparent that it did not quite work the way I expected. On getting feedback from my former students after they had gained some teaching experience, I realized two things. First, they were as confused and uncertain about the theoretical issues discussed in my class as they were during their period of training; their teaching experience did not help them to resolve the basic controversies. Second, it was rather obvious that what they had learnt in my programme did not enable them to become creative teachers or to analyse and improve their teaching procedures. Instead, they seemed to rely a lot on their intuition and often they simply copied the techniques and procedures, not necessarily of a high quality, used by other teachers. My experience has thus confirmed the correctness of Christopher Brumfit's view:

We cannot afford to leave all questions of how to synthesize research conclusions to teachers actually working in classroom, for – more often than not – they lack expertise, training, and above all, time for such activity. [Brumfit, 1984:2]

Apart from my own teaching and teacher-training experiences, I have had many opportunities to observe language teaching at different levels, in different educational institutions and in different countries of the world. My impression has often been that many teachers, however experienced, are still confused and do not realize what is really

essential in classroom teaching and learning. In planning and conducting their classes they are often so concerned about 'trendy' things, such as caring and sharing, providing genuine communicative experience, making the class interesting and relevant, that they often lose sight of what should be the most essential element of every teaching session: the provision of a worthwhile learning experience which contributes significantly to the development of the learner's L2 (second language) competence. Certainly, we must not forget that we teach whole people, and I wholeheartedly subscribe to the opinion that every teaching process should make both the learner and the teacher emotionally richer and more understanding. Yet our primary responsibility to our learners is to give them a new tool with which to communicate and to experience hitherto unknown areas of life. We should also remember that in real life, where the time, energy, and financial resources of our learners are limited, language teaching has to meet the criterion of efficiency. This means that at whatever level we teach, it should be obvious to us and to our learners that they are making rapid progress and that they are using their classroom time well.

On the basis of all these experiences and observations I have come to the conclusion that teacher-training programmes should provide trainees with some form of firm theoretical scaffolding or general schema which will help them to plan their teaching at the beginning of their careers and to interpret their experiences in a principled and coherent way. This schema should be directly related to the central issue in language pedagogy, that is, to the question of how to make teaching so efficient that it would promote only genuine and successful learning experiences. This problem is related, in turn, to the question of what options are possible, that is, what types of learning procedures lead to a successful development of L2 competence. The main thesis of this book is that there are basically three such options: listening to or reading texts in the target language with comprehension; attempting to communicate via this language; or reproducing, reconstructing, and transforming model texts in the L2. These three successful language learning procedures logically lead to the idea of three basic teaching strategies by which they can be promoted. However, these three strategies can be combined with one another (I would contend, only consecutively); the various combinations making a fourth strategy – the eclectic one. One of the essential messages of this book is that none of these four strategies is pedagogically superior to, or more effective than, the others in any absolute sense. Their effectiveness can be considered only in relation to two sets of variables – those related to the personality of the learner and those connected with the teaching context. In other words, particular configurations of variables from these two sets may point to one of the strategies as the most effective under given circumstances. It is my belief that these four teaching strategies represent the basic options in language pedagogy and form the kind of theoretical framework which can help the language teacher to find his own direction in the contemporary chaos of pedagogical views and suggestions.

A further aspect of my professional experience constitutes one of the cornerstones of my teaching philosophy and is reflected in this book. It is related to my conviction that two tasks are both the most essential to, and the most difficult for, the learner. One of them is gaining a functional, automatized control of the phonological and morphologico-syntactic systems of the target language, together with learning and making available for production a large number of lexical items, collocations, phrases, and routine formulas.

The other task is achieving the ability to combine all these elements into novel utterances expressing, as exactly as possible, the learner's intended meaning. Once this is achieved, the rest is relatively easy. The rest may include the acquisition of rules and conventions of sociolinguistic appropriateness. Certainly, it is easy only in the qualitative sense, i.e. in the sense of the inherent difficulty of the learning task. In the quantitative sense the learning of all the culture-specific rules of sociolinguistic appropriateness may be the work of a lifetime; I do not think that even the most communicatively orientated course can teach enough of them. It is also my belief that the means by which this productive and creative ability is gained is of little relevance. It may be gained by the learner's attempts at negotiating meanings in communicative and quasi-communicative situations, but this is certainly not the only way. It can be gained by much deliberate memorizing and by reproduction and transformation of language models. For this reason I refuse to believe that making novel utterances in a communicative situation has to be considered a more profitable learning experience than making novel, or at least partially novel, utterances out of the known elements in a task involving the retelling or adaptation of a text.

Drawing to an end these introductory remarks, I would like to admit, and at the same time to warn the reader, that much that is said here is highly speculative and programmatic. Yet at present, when we still know so little about the psychological nature of the processes of language learning and language use, any attempt at constructing a theoretical framework in language pedagogy has to be speculative. Moreover, I do not believe, even when we have learnt more, that language teaching methodology will be able to enjoy the state of relative scientific certainty common to the natural sciences. I am completely in agreement with Christopher Brumfit (1984 : 20), who sees methodology as a form of discussion similar to the formation of political and social policies and opinions, rather than to the discovery of the laws of nature in the descriptive sciences. At the same time, I hope that my beliefs and speculations expressed here have a rational basis and are as well informed as is possible at present, so that they do not contradict in any respect the known facts revealed by the particular disciplines contributing to language pedagogy.

This study is intended, first of all, for teacher-trainees and practising language teachers. Even though they may eventually reject a lot of what is suggested and recommended here, if this book leads them to ask themselves the essential questions about what constitutes genuine learning experience in their classes and if it helps them to answer this question, its purpose will have been fulfilled.

Please note that throughout the text the student is referred to as 'he'. This is not to exclude female students, but for ease of style.

Waldemar Marton

Poznań
1987

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Chapter 1

The Receptive Strategy of Language Teaching

The notion of 'teaching strategy' is defined and the four basic language teaching strategies are listed. This chapter is devoted to a description and analysis of the receptive strategy. This strategy is, first of all, analysed in terms of the psycholinguistic characteristics of the process of purely receptive learning. Some evidence confirming the effectiveness of this kind of learning is presented. The basic pedagogical functions which receptive teaching is supposed to fulfil are then introduced and discussed. This is followed by an analysis of the pedagogical usefulness of the strategy. This usefulness is not considered in any absolute sense but rather as relative to two important sets of factors, i.e. to learner variables and to contextual variables. Among the former, the learner's personality, age and language aptitude are discussed as being the most relevant, while the discussion of contextual factors involves intensity of teaching, size of class, level of language study, and teacher characteristics. Finally, some inherent pedagogical risks connected with the application of the strategy and some possibilities of its misuse are presented.

Four basic language teaching strategies

Some current definitions of the term 'strategy'

The terms 'strategy' and 'approach' are very frequently used, more or less synonymously, in contemporary literature on language pedagogy, in the sense of a globally conceived procedure, philosophy or way of teaching. Yet the criteria in terms of which the particular strategies or approaches are defined are not homogeneous since they refer to various important parameters of the language learning/teaching process. Thus Stern (1983 : 505–507) lists six major strategies which are related to three crucial options in language teaching. One of these options concerns the use or non-use of the learner's native language in L2 learning; another is related to the question of whether the learner subjectively experiences the target language through participation in communicative acts or whether he treats it as a formal object of study. The third option has to do with the presence or absence of a metalinguistic awareness of L2 in the learner. Other researchers use similar or different criteria of differentiation. Ellis (1982), for instance, describes two contemporary approaches, calling one of them 'formal communicative' and the other 'informal communicative', and contrasting them with the traditional 'non-communicative' approach. Thus, his classification is based both on the goals of language learning and teaching (i.e. on whether or not communicative competence is the goal) and on the ways in which language is learnt and taught (i.e. on whether these procedures are informal-experiential, or formal-pedagogical). Roberts (1982) distinguishes between

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two current approaches, labelling one the 'communicative' and the other the 'humanistic/psychological' approach, thus contrasting teaching based on a clear definition of objectives and methodology with teaching which assigns primary importance to the affective domain and a 'whole person' approach.

Our definition of the term and the four strategies

Although all these and other current classifications quite adequately capture some of the crucial issues and options in language pedagogy, at the same time, owing to the fact that they are based on heterogeneous criteria and related to parameters of unequal importance, they fail to emphasize what is the most basic and the most crucial criterion distinguishing various possible language teaching procedures. The criterion in question is directly related to an operationally definable strategy employed by the learner to develop a competence in L2. The fact of this relationship also makes the term 'teaching strategy' preferable to the term 'approach'. For the purpose of this study, then, a language teaching strategy is defined as a globally conceived set of pedagogical procedures imposing a definite learning strategy on the learner directly leading to the development of competence in the target language. These procedures are derived from a set of correlative assumptions concerning the nature of language, the nature of second language development and the functions of language teaching. Since the notion of language teaching strategy is directly linked to the notion of developing competence in L2, it is also connected with the idea of success in gaining a practical command of the target language. Accordingly, procedures which are sometimes treated as language teaching activities but which do not aim at the development of a competence in L2 cannot be subsumed under language teaching strategies. These would include such activities as an explicit study of L2 grammar for the sake of increasing the learner's linguistic knowledge (which was the case in the grammar-translation method), or the study of the works of art representing the culture associated with the target language. The notion of language teaching strategy does not include, either, any general educational factors, such as the affective domain or factors connected with a 'whole person' approach. These factors are not so much excluded as rather taken for granted since consideration of them characterizes any contemporary educational process irrespective of what is being taught, but in no way do they uniquely specify any of the learning strategies by which competence in L2 may be developed. Thus our notion of language teaching strategy is totally incompatible with the idea of 'humanistic' or 'affective' strategies.

With this concept of language teaching strategy in mind it can be postulated on the basis of accumulated teaching experience and second language acquisition research that there exist only four basic and successful strategies of language teaching, which can be labelled the *receptive strategy*, the *communicative strategy*, the *reconstructive strategy*, and the *eclectic strategy*. Each of these strategies will be briefly described, its pedagogical advantages and disadvantages discussed, and some relevant learner and contextual variables which might support the choice of one strategy over others will be presented. This chapter is devoted to a description and analysis of the receptive strategy.

The receptive strategy: a psycholinguistic analysis

Definition

The learning strategy that the receptive strategy of teaching imposes on the learner (or, in a less autocratic formulation, allows the learner to use) consists of silent processing of input without the production of any utterances in the target language. The basic condition which has to be fulfilled if this learning strategy can take place is that the input must be meaningful, or, in other words, it must be comprehensible to the learner. The learning strategy in question can be also seen as a manifestation of the super-ordinate strategy of language acquisition (underlying both first and second language development) which is usually defined as hypothesis formation and testing. In this case, however, hypothesis testing is not related to feedback following the learner's attempts at communicating (since he does not make any such attempts) but is based on the observation of the input for the confirmation or non-confirmation of the learner's hypotheses.

The receptive strategy is thus based on the belief that we do not have two separate language competencies, one related to reception and the other to production, but that there is a global linguistic competence underlying both the receptive and the productive activities and, basically, it does not matter by which type of activity this competence is developed. Speaking in terms of language skills, this involves the belief that there is direct transfer from the receptive skills of listening and reading to the productive skills of speaking and writing. In other words, the receptive strategy is based on the assumption that by exposing our learners to meaningful oral and written texts and by developing in this way their receptive skills of listening and reading, we are also developing their potential and their readiness for speaking and writing, which, once sufficient global competence has been developed, can be easily realized in the production of oral and written messages.

Evidence confirming the effectiveness of receptive learning

The belief that overall language competence can successfully be developed merely by practising receptive activities is upheld by several contemporary researchers on second language acquisition and quite a few language educators. Krashen is probably the best known among them and is also the one who has made the strongest claim concerning this belief and its pedagogical implications. In his well-known intake hypothesis, Krashen (1981: 107–108) claims that speaking and writing are not essential to acquisition and that one can acquire competence in a first or second language without ever producing anything in it. Thus meaningful exposure to the target language is both the necessary and the sufficient condition for its successful acquisition; anything else, even communicative interaction via this language, is actually superfluous for this purpose.

Although Krashen and other researchers sharing his point of view admit that their conviction of the essential role of receptive activities in the language acquisition process is only a hypothesis, there is substantial evidence confirming this hypothesis. This evidence comes from three sources. The first is L1 acquisition research, which has established that in child language development, comprehension always precedes

production. It has been pointed out that a child acquiring his mother tongue normally demonstrates comprehension of utterances at least six months prior to demonstrating his readiness for speaking (Lenneberg, 1967). This shows that the child does not start speaking simultaneously with beginning to comprehend language but rather that he first develops his competence through listening and when he starts making his first utterances he just manifests the competence he has already acquired. The fact that production is not necessary for the development of competence is also confirmed by congenitally dysarthric children (those who suffer from deformities in the oral cavity or pharynx and who are not able to produce intelligible speech) who never become deficient in their understanding of the language to which they are exposed (Lenneberg, 1962).

The second source of evidence confirming the possibility of developing a competence in L2 via receptive activities is anthropological in nature and is related to Sorenson's (1967) often-quoted study of multilingualism in the north-west Amazon. In his study, Sorenson describes the Indian tribes living in the Vaupes River area, where over twenty mutually unintelligible languages are spoken. These tribes all have exogamic marriage structure – they always marry outside their tribe and language group. Consequently, they are all able to speak at least three languages: their own tribe's, their spouse's, and Tukano, which is the *lingua franca* of the area. The fact which is particularly relevant to our discussion is that these highly successful language learners acquire a new language in a totally receptive way, by listening to it and by passively memorizing lists of words, forms and phrases in it. They start speaking the new language only when they have already developed a fairly high degree of competence in it and when making utterances comes naturally and easily.

The third source of evidence confirming that competence in a second language can be developed by listening and/or reading is related to several contemporary methods of language teaching based on the implementation of the receptive principle. These methods, developed and advocated by such language educators as Asher (1969), Postovsky (1974), Winitz and Reeds (1973), Gary (1974), and Nord (1980), incorporate a fairly long pre-speaking period at the beginning of language study. During this pre-speaking period the learner is very intensively exposed to the target language through participation in various receptive activities but is not required or even allowed to produce anything in it. He responds to the teaching he receives in non-oral ways because the teacher must have some control over the learning process, but the main purpose of his responses is to demonstrate that he is meaningfully processing the input. Accordingly, the responses are limited to carrying out instructions and commands given in the target language, to performing multiple-choice tests based on pictorial cues, or to responding in the learner's native language. The effectiveness of these methods and the claim that they eventually lead to the development of productive skills have been tested by several empirical studies, e.g. those carried out by Postovsky (1974; 1977), Gary (1975), Ingram *et al* (1974), Thiele and Scheibner-Herzig (1983). The results of these and other similar studies together with less rigorous observations derived from fairly extensive teaching practice involving the use of the pre-speaking period, make one conclude that the methods in question do indeed build up a global competence in the target language effectively. This competence is manifested not only by highly developed listening and/or reading comprehension but also by an immediate spin-off from this receptive ability to the ability of producing fairly well-formed utterances. On the other hand, it is also true