

Tradition and Transition in Second Language Teaching Methodology

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The field of English language teaching is in transition. Neither traditional methods of classroom instruction, nor more recent, communicative approaches, when used alone, have been able to address the scope and level of English proficiency required for participation in today's global community. What appears to be needed is a principled integration of the two. This paper will attempt to provide such an integration by drawing on theoretical principles, research findings, and classroom concerns. It will illustrate how components of traditional methods, including grammar instruction, correction, dictation, dialogue, and native language usage, can hold continued significance for language learning, when integrated into communicative questioning strategies, participation patterns, and interactive materials. Throughout the paper, these illustrations of integration will be contextualized, described, and supported through references to research.

The field of language teaching has been one of tradition and transition since its inception hundreds, indeed, by some accounts, thousands of years ago (See Howatt 1984, Kelly 1969, and Richards & Rodgers 1986). The teaching of the English language, although a much newer pursuit than the teaching of languages such as Greek and Latin or Chinese, for example, has already been through many transitions in methodology. What are now considered traditional methods were once the innovations of their time, characterized by the attitudes and values of their creators, who recommended that other educators abandon one method and choose another, with unquestioning optimism, as though this latter were the solution to their classroom concerns. (See Clarke 1982).

In the past fifty years alone, English language teaching has gone through a whirlwind of transitions in its methodology, from grammar translation to direct method, to audiolingualism, to cognitive code, and a host of variations in each. Other methods, whose range of implementation has been much smaller in scope, have also been introduced. Among the most popular of these are Silent Way (Gattegno 1972), Total Physical Response (Asher 1969), Suggestopedia (Lazanov 1978), and Counseling Learning (Curran 1972).

In recent years, the most substantive transition in English language teaching has taken place through a collection of practices, materials, and beliefs about teaching and learning that are known by many different names, for example, communicative methodology, communicative language teaching, and communicative approach. (See again, Richards & Rodgers 1986)

Currently, English teaching methodology is going through yet another transition. This transition is the outgrowth of two highly linked developments in the wider field of language studies: First, there has been a broadening in the scope and diversity of English language use needed for participation in today's global community. This development has been accompanied by a recognition of the need to guide English language learners toward high levels of proficiency, and to do so as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Secondly, there has been a growing body of research that is related to instructional issues. The findings of such research have indicated that learners need a balance of communication, instruction, and correction to guide the learning process. Further, these findings have suggested teaching and learning strategies, materials, and tasks that can integrate these experiences for learners in ways that are efficient and effective.

What is emerging is a methodology that integrates instructional assumptions and components of traditional and communicative methods. It is this integration that will be discussed throughout this paper. First however, the paper will review several traditions that characterize most every method, across transitions and over time.

Traditions in teaching methodology

Each of the above methods has its own distinctive characteristics, of course, but together they share several important commonalities. First, every method purports to be a better method than other methods, and each has commanded both a loyal following of supporters and a disbelieving chorus of skeptics. Indeed, an increasing number of methodologists would argue that none of these methods could possibly meet all of a learner's needs.

As many researchers point out, in addition, language teaching and learning are too complex for any individual method to be able to address for an extended period of time. (See, for example, Kumaravadivelu 1994). Far more critical to a learner's success is a teacher who is informed about learning processes, is aware of, and sensitive to, learner needs, and uses a variety of teaching skills to guide and assist the learning process. (See Prabhu 1990 for further discussion).

Second, each method is affected by the contexts in which it is implemented. Thus, even the most prescriptive or rigid method will be implemented differently, depending on whether it is being used within a second or a foreign language environment, in a large class or on an individual basis, to teach children, adolescents, or adults. Factors such as the educa-

tional and professional background of the teachers also play a critical role in the ways in which a method is employed. (See illustrative studies in Chaudron 1988).

Third, each method embraces a number of goals, concerns, and values that have been sustained over time. These traditional goals, concerns, and values have shaped the ways in which educators have approached each transition in methodology or adapted to transitions forged by others. Thus, these goals, concerns, and values remain a constant in our current English teaching.

What are the common goals concerns, and values that most educators share no matter what methods they use, or choose not to use? These will be described in the following section.

Tradition in goals, concerns, and values

Our goals are numerous, but one of our foremost goals is that our students succeed in their language learning. Whether we are classroom practitioners, methodologists, or policy makers, we feel a responsibility toward helping students toward success. As we try to meet this goal, we share several serious concerns. These concerns cluster around our many responsibilities as educators. We want to make sure that our students meet criteria for success in their current classrooms, as well as in future contexts and potential endeavors that require knowledge and use of another language.

Together, these concerns find particular focus in the case of English. So diverse is English language use in today's global community, that success for our students might mean any number of things, and, all too often, many things, from accomplishing daily classroom tasks and assignments, to passing school-wide examinations, to preparing for the next level of instruction, to excelling on college and university entrance or qualifying examinations, to applying skills in communication for travel, business, academic, and professional pursuits. Together with our students, we share a concern that there might be too much for them to learn and therefore ever so much for us to teach.

Our values are typically focused on a few time cherished traditions. We value the profession of teaching, and the work of teachers. We are sensitive to our role in adjusting our methods so that they are appropriate to the needs, goals, and expectations of our students, and in compliance with the educational and financial resources of the schools, colleges, and universities in which students pursue their language studies.

These are a few of the time honored goals, concerns, and values we bring to the classroom, no matter which method we employ in our teaching. Communicative methodology, too, embraces these goals, concerns, and values. Its goal is student success. It is concerned with students' current, future, and potential needs for language learning. It values the teacher in this process. What sets communicative methodology apart from other methods, however, is its view of the classroom processes through which teach-

ers can best assist students in meeting their goals and addressing their concerns. These processes have been actualized through classroom activities and instructional techniques that have emphasized communication as a way to learn. As will be discussed in the following section, it is this behind communicative methodology which is called into question, and has served to shape the transition in our field at this time.

Transition in English teaching methodology

During this time of transition in language teaching methodology, as traditions of other methodologies interface with communicative methodology, it is important to point out the very robust contributions that communicative methodology has made to the education of language learners. Such contributions help to explain how it is that communicative methodology is leading the transition in English teaching methodology.

Much of communicative methodology was developed as definitions of language competence expanded from grammatical competence to communicative competence, and gave rise to new thinking about the importance of communication to the purposes of language, to the needs of learners, and to the processes of language learning. This modified perspective on language competence has been demonstrated throughout the classroom activities, materials, and instructional strategies of communicative methodology. As such, they focus on language as it is used for purposes of communication, and are designed for learners whose needs extend across the multiplicity of uses noted in the previous section. In addition, these activities, materials, and strategies of communicative methodology have modified the appearance of the language classroom.

Thus, in many communicative classrooms, grammar rules are made available to learners in indirect ways, through reading and listening to meaningful, comprehensible input. These practices often de-emphasize, and even supplant, direct instruction. A tolerance of learners' grammatical errors is frequently preferred over correction thereof, with this latter strategy reserved for errors in the communication of message meaning.

In addition, traditional techniques such as dictation, recitation, drill, and dialog are typically placed in the background, or eliminated entirely in communicative classrooms, in order to emphasize classroom communication and discussion. Teacher-fronted lessons are substituted with activities involving student role plays and problem solving, which engage them in communication as they work in groups and pairs. As teachers try to incorporate communicative strategies throughout their work, they often find it necessary to suppress the use of their students' native language, whether in planning classroom lessons or carrying out classroom activities, even when the native language is shared among the teachers and the students.

In their emphasis on language learning for purposes of communication, the activities, materials, and strategies of communicative methodol-

ogy have come to constitute a rich and enriching curriculum that has assisted many students. Research has shown that they have been more effective than grammar translation, audiolingualism, or other more traditional methods in promoting students' confidence and their fluency in speech and writing, and in accelerating the early stages of their language development. (See, for example, Lightbown and Spada 1993 for review).

These activities, materials, and strategies, however, have not been sufficient to bring learners to the levels of proficiency that many now require for effective English language use. This realization has thus challenged the assumption behind communicative methodology, that a language can be acquired not only FOR purposes of communication, but also THROUGH processes of communication. As recent research has shown, however, this assumption does not seem to apply to all aspects of language learning, particularly those involving complex grammar or sociolinguistic and pragmatic subtleties. This is especially apparent for English language learning and teaching because of its multiple goals, because of the wide range of social contexts in which English is used, and because of the high level of proficiency often required for students' success.

Thus, we find in English teaching methodology the need for yet another transition. Fortunately, as educators, we can be guided by a growing number of research findings on four central processes that contribute to successful language learning. What these findings suggest is that communication is very critical to language learning, but it is not sufficient to meet the needs and goals of many learners.

Indeed, it now appears that some of important dimensions of the learning process might be better served by activities, materials, and instructional practices that integrate communicative methodology with traditional methodologies, and do so in creative, yet highly principled ways. These activities, materials, and instructional practices will be discussed below, first with respect to the research findings that underlie them, and then through a review of the application of these findings to an integrated methodology.

Language learning research: insights and implications

As we participate in yet another transition in language teaching methodology, we can do so, with knowledge of several characteristics of successful second language learning: First, second language learners must have access to second language input that is meaningful and comprehensible. (Krashen, 1985, 1994). When the input is not comprehensible, learners need to be allowed, and encouraged, to indicate their difficulty through clarification questions and expressions. Their interlocutors must respond by adjusting their input. (Long, 1985, Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987).

As designed in theory, if not always realized in practice, communicative methodology, can create an environment in which such input can be made available. (See again Krashen 1985, 1994). As will be discussed next, however, communicative methodology would appear to be less effective

with respect to three additional conditions for successful language learning. As a second condition for successful language learning, learners need to focus their attention on the language they are learning. To address this need, they must attend not only to the meaning and comprehensibility of input, but to the structures, sounds, and forms that shape the input. Thus, they must be able to notice the ways in which the sounds and structures of the language relate to the meanings of messages they encode, to understand these relationships of form and meaning in context, and to apply them appropriately in their speech and writing. (Long 1996, Schmidt 1990, 1992). Such opportunities are difficult to obtain through communicative input alone.

More specifically, learners need to know the ways in which concepts such as time, action and activity, space, number, and gender, are encoded in the second language, and how social norms are observed and maintained linguistically. They must also have access to those features of language that carry very little meaning. For English that means features such as articles and redundant endings, for example. (See again, Long 1995). Here, too, it would appear that communication would need to be supplemented and, in some cases, greatly enhanced, in order to assist learners to notice such features.

Third, learners need to produce spoken and written output, and to modify their speech or writing when it is not comprehensible, appropriate, or accurate. (Swain, 1985, 1993). To do this latter requires yet a fourth component: Students need feedback on their production, so that they can modify it toward greater comprehensibility, appropriateness, and accuracy. (Long 1996, Schmidt and Frota 1986). Otherwise, without an appropriate model, they may simply repeat themselves, make the same errors, or come up with new ones, and find that second language learning is even more frustrating and complex than they thought it could be.

Here, too, it would seem that communication alone would be insufficient, perhaps even detrimental, to the learner in the long run. While there could easily be a basis for feedback during communicative interaction, when learners' imprecisions interfered with message meaning, imprecisions in their grammatical form could be overlooked if communication were comprehensible. Thus, there would be no need for learners to modify their production toward greater grammaticality, nor to incorporate new grammatical features toward their language development. For certain features of grammar, some learners might be led to maintain a level of proficiency, characterized by fluency, but not accuracy. (See Higgs and Clifford 1982 for further elaboration of this concern).

In sum, these are four of the key experiences that have been identified for successful second language learning: Learners must be given input that is made meaningful and comprehensible. They must pay attention to the form of the input as well as its meaning. They must produce the second language, and be given feedback in order to modify their production to-

ward greater comprehensibility, appropriateness, and accuracy.

These dimensions of second language learning are important from a theoretical and empirical point of view. As will be elaborated throughout the sections that follow, they motivate and inform the current transition in language teaching methodology.

Transition and integration in English teaching methodology

As noted above, there are many communicative activities, materials, and instructional strategies that strive to bring learners opportunities to experience these four dimensions of successful language learning. However, communication, by nature, cannot address learners' needs completely, because it is focused primarily on the meaning of messages, rather than on the form that messages take. To draw learners' attention to the forms of messages that encode their meaning, and to do so with certainty, has thus become one of the foremost challenges to English teaching methodology. The urgency of this challenge has led the field into this time of transition.

This is where teaching strategies, activities, and materials drawn from traditional methods, when integrated into a communicative curriculum, can play a vital role in language learning. Those that seem especially relevant to learners' needs and goals for English language learning at this time are noted briefly below, and then discussed in the sections to follow.

The major teaching strategies to be described are direct instruction and correction, as they can be implemented to help learners acquire features in a second language that are difficult to access from simply listening to, or reading, its messages and texts, and from emphasizing message meaning without attention to message form. Among the features to be discussed, therefore, are rules of grammar and culture that bear such close resemblance to rules in students' native language that they fail to notice them in communicative input, or to rely on them to comprehend such input. Approaching these features through strategies more direct than communication is important because, when accuracy of these features makes little difference in their communication of message meaning, it is unlikely that students can obtain feedback from their listeners to guide them toward grammatical or sociolinguistic precision.

Also to be discussed below are several types of activities through which these teaching strategies can be implemented in the classroom. These include grammar decision-making, information exchange, dictogloss, and dictocomp tasks, which bear some resemblance to traditional activities such as grammar exercises, dictation, and recitation. What makes these three activities transitional, and therefore, distinct from their latter counterparts, however, is that they are designed to focus learners' attention on grammatical features and forms in relation to meaning, and in so doing, they also appear to guide students along the path of grammar learning.

Activities such as these, however, even when carried out among students as they work in small groups or pairs, cannot be accomplished with-

out the careful planning, input, and orchestration of teachers who are thoroughly involved in their students' language learning. To be discussed below, therefore is the transition in perception of the teacher's contribution to students' learning. This can be seen in a renewed respect for the central role of the teacher in designing and implementing activities, materials, and strategies for the language classroom. Also discussed, will be the renewed interest in the ways in which teachers can work to restore the importance of the student's native language, in planning classroom lessons, carrying out classroom activities, and facilitating language learning.

What is seen during this time of transition is not a shifting back and forth between communicative and traditional methodologies, but rather an integration of these two approaches. The following sections will therefore discuss this integration in more detail, beginning with principles and practices for the integration of communication, instruction, and correction, followed by those aimed toward the integration of teachers and their students as a resource toward students' success in language learning.

Integration of instruction, correction, and communication

Instruction, correction, and communication each plays a role in second language learning. Far more powerful an impact, however, can come through their integration in the classroom. For example, research has shown that grammar instruction and correction are particularly effective when they accompany opportunities for oral communication inside and outside the classroom. The grammar of those students who receive instruction and correction alone improves, of course, but not as much as those who engage in all three of these learning foci. (Montgomery & Eisenstein 1986, Spada 1987). In a foreign language environment, with few opportunities for ongoing English communication outside the classroom, it is even more important for teachers to maintain a balance among communication, instruction, and correction.

In prior years, when attention was given to instruction and correction, this was largely on the basis of textbook writers' ideas of how this should be done. This was actualized in a number of ways. Sometimes, for example, the ideas came from principles from linguistics, and other times from education. Here, the importance and degree of difficulty of a rule could be the determinant of its order of instruction and attention to correction. Sometimes the ideas came from particular methods, especially those that stressed rule practice and application. Sometimes they were effective in assisting grammar development, but many other times, they were not. Students and teachers became frustrated in their efforts.

Fortunately, research on language learning has uncovered a good deal about the scope and sequence of grammar learning, and the role of instruction and correction in this activity. Numerous researchers have contributed to this effort. Although both communication AND instruction with correction are vital to language learning, we can now identify fairly confi-

dently which dimensions of a second language can be learned through an emphasis on communication and which respond better to an emphasis on instruction and correction. This is expressed in the following guidelines, which themselves are based on reviews by Harley (1993), Lightbown and Spada (1993), Pica (1994).

Guidelines for grammar instruction and correction: target features

Current guidelines for grammar instruction and correction indicate that learners need instruction and correction for features in a second language with any or all of the following characteristics: 1. They closely resemble features in the learner's native language. 2. They are (nearly or totally) imperceptible to the learner. 3. They occur infrequently in the input available to the learner. 4. They have complex morphosyntax.

What these features have in common is that they are difficult for learners to notice in the input available to them. As a result, learners find additional difficulty in making comparisons between such features as they occur in input with their own versions of such features as they produce them. This difficulty in noticing and comparing can, in turn, impede their second language development unless given feedback, with opportunities to respond through modified production.

These are the very features, therefore, which can make second language learning through communication such a challenging task, and call for an approach through which communication can be integrated with instruction and correction. Examples of such features and the difficulties they pose for learners are provided below. Suggestions for integrative activities are provided in a later section. The discussion begins with reference to difficulties of particular relevance to Chinese speakers learning English.

Chinese-English resemblance: Word order

Chinese and English are quite distant from each other in their grammatical systems. Nevertheless, researchers have identified a number of areas that are of individual and collective relevance here. (See, for example, Swan and Smith 1987, Wu 1995). One area is English word order, which is like Chinese word order of subject-verb-object (SVO) for its statements, but not for its questions, where inversion is applied to sentence subject and finite verb. Thus, in English, She is coming to Taiwan becomes Is she coming to Taiwan?

Question word order in English grammar may be even more challenging for Chinese speakers because English questions follow SVO order in certain contexts, but not in all of them. One context that can arise frequently during communication with learners reflects the listener's need for clarification or confirmation of the learner's utterance. Such a need is often encoded through what are known as echoic questions, such as She's going to Taiwan? or She's going where?. Learners are exposed to such SVO ques-

tions all the time when they are engaged in communicative interaction in which message clarity and comprehensibility are vital to its transmission. Hearing such question types draws their attention further to SVO sentence structure in English, but provides them with limited access to inversion structures for English questions.

Learners need to be able to distinguish SVO and inverted question forms and their form-meaning relationships in input available to them, and to use question forms appropriately in their production. Yet the complexity of English question forms and their frequent encoding through SVO word order, suggest that learning to form English questions may require more than communication alone. Since SVO is what learners WOULD use in Chinese, and what they COULD use in English, they might not be able to advance beyond such communicative, pragmatic use of English unless the differences between Chinese and English in their speech and writing were pointed out to them.

Imperceptibility: Verb endings

Another challenge in grammar learning can be found in English verb endings. Here, Chinese native speakers, not unlike other English language learners, are confronted with imperceptibility as well as a diminution in communicative value when English verbs appear in redundant contexts. Most verb endings in English are reduced, unstressed, and/or elided. Many are voiceless and therefore difficult to hear in spoken English. They often go unnoticed in either spoken or written input, because they are not necessary for comprehension. As such, they are redundant with other linguistic or situational aspects of context, and require greater highlighting for the learner, the kinds of highlighting that instruction and correction can provide.

An illustrative example can be found in English consonant clusters (-ks, -kt). These are particularly sensitive to Chinese influence when they are in the final position of English words and syllables because Chinese has no consonant clusters in the final position of syllables. As a result, learners might learn to say lai or like instead of likes and liked, unless instructed or assisted to do otherwise. (See Pica 1994 and Sato, 1984 for further details).

Even structures that have clear relationships of form and function can be difficult for learners to recognize on their own because they appear at the ends of words, often in reduced or voiceless forms. Among these are plural -s and progressive -ing. Such features can be learned far more quickly if the learners' attention is drawn to them through instruction. (Pica 1985).

Guidelines for grammar instruction and correction: implementation

So far, this discussion of guidelines has addressed their application to the identification of target features on which to focus instruction and cor-

rection. Further needed, of course are guidelines for implementing such instruction and correction. Again research has shed light on this topic. And again, research has shown consistently that the most effective instruction is that in which meaningful communication is emphasized as well. (Brock, Crookes, Day, & Long, 1986, Day and Shapson 1991, Harley 1989, Lightbown & Spada 1990, Lightbown, Spada & Ranta 1991, White 1990, 1991). Recent research has provided a basis for the following guidelines regarding the implementation of grammar and correction in the classroom.

1. Effective activities for grammar learning focus learners' attention on second language form in relation to message meaning

In the case of verb tenses, for example, it is important that they be pointed out to learners as often as possible, whenever they appear in texts or spoken discourse, for example. Texts can be specially created to highlight the use of these forms in context. As such, the texts might center around stories, histories, world events. Indeed any text would be helpful if it provided at least one category of verb contrast. Even better would be an activity that involved all modalities, from reading the text, and/or listening to the text, taking notes on it, and reporting it back to other class members. (See, for example, Genesee 1994).

2. Effective activities for grammar learning focus learners' attention on one error at a time

Research has shown that teachers' reduced repetitions of students' errors, with emphasis on the error itself, were more highly associated with learners' correct responses than were expansions or elaborations of learners' utterances or isolated suppliance of a correct form. (Chaudron 1977). Thus, simple, short feedback that highlights one error at a time appears to be more effective than a complete overhaul of the learner's message. This should not imply that teachers imitate students' production, save for correction of only one error. Rather, it suggests that teachers continue to use target varieties of the second language, but draw attention to only one feature at a time, for example, verb tense contrasts. Thus the teacher can first offer a completely accurate version of the students' entire message, then segment one particular word or phrase, and draw the learner's attention to that.

3. Effective activities for grammar learning are provided when learners are ready to learn

One of the earliest claims to emerge from second language research was that learners' errors reflected their hypotheses about the language they were learning. This is a claim that continues to be held widely to date. Thus, instruction or correction cannot alter the path of language learning.