ENGLISH TEACHING IN THE NINETEEN–SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES

From the mid-60s to the late 70s I was an untrained EFL teacher, working first in Oxford and then in Paris. What follows is therefore necessarily more of an 'underview' than an overview – the period as seen by someone who, in between preparation, teaching and marking, was trying to educate himself professionally and to keep track of the changing winds of theoretical fashion.

At first everything was very simple. Our 'theory' was a vague post-direct-method orientation. (We were experts at explanation without translation: any EFL teacher could mime 'mortgage repayment' or 'epistemology' at the drop of a hat.) Beginners' textbooks recounted the exciting experiences of two young foreigners visiting London. At higher levels we did grammar, pronunciation, dictation and conversation, taught 'situational' language, 'went through' texts and asked 'comprehension' questions. We set and corrected homeworks. It was well known that this was how you taught English. Our students got better, which proved that it worked; though they did go on making lots of mistakes. The full-timers, who spent their days in class with other foreigners, didn't learn as fast as the part-timers, who worked with English people. Perhaps this should have told us something.

Structuralism and audiolingualism reached us belatedly and complicated matters. It appeared that language was a set of habits; a second language was another set of habits; mistakes came from old habits interfering with new ones; the solution was 'overlearning' through repeated structure drills. This was best done in one of the new language 'laboratories' (a wonderful term that made us all feel like scientists). The resulting lessons combined ineffectiveness and boredom, qualities that today's teaching generally manages to keep separate.

I read what I could find on language and methodology. The journals *ELT* and *Language Learning* were helpful, as were books by Hornby (1954), Kruisinga (1932), Gimson (1962), Quirk (1968), Palmer (1925), Billows (1961), Weinreich (1953) and Lado (1957). Some writers, like Halliday, MacIntosh and Strevens (1964), were difficult; I supposed that if couldn't understand a professional book it must be my fault.

The Association of Recognised English Language Schools ran useful weekend teachers' courses. Membership of ATEFL (later IATEFL) and BAAL, both founded in 1967, also broadened my horizons. As I worked out a personal synthesis of traditional approaches and recent developments, I came to feel that I knew pretty well how to teach languages. Things were no longer simple, but they were still manageable.

Then everything suddenly got MUCH more complicated, as researchers started coming up with new theoretical and methodological bases for language teaching. These were, in alphabetical order: analytic syllabuses, authentic materials, communication in the classroom, communicative competence, discourse analysis, discovery, drama, ESP, functions, groupwork, humanistic teaching, information gap, interlanguage, learner control, needs analysis, notions, pairwork, problem solving, process-not-product, projects, role play, self-access, simulations, skills, strategies and the threshold level.

It was an exhilarating time: the air was full of discovery. In Paris, where I was now working, the British Council's inspirational English Language Officer, Alan Maley, brought over all the big names. For 50 francs you could attend, for example, a weekend workshop on discourse analysis by Coulthard and Brazil, with free coffee thrown in. At last I got my professional training.

Attitudes to the new ideas were often more enthusiastic than critical. Needs analysis generated great excitement. You established what your learner needed to do with English, punched in the code for the relevant language functions, pressed a button, and the machine cranked out the appropriate language specifications. Or would do, after a little more research. Taxonomies mushroomed: the 'skill' of reading was now 19 subskills (Munby 1978), all of which you were supposed to teach on the assumption that learning a new language took one back to cognitive zero. Everybody talked about language *use*, citing Hymes (1971: 278): 'There are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless'. For many, newer was axiomatically better. People promoted, with enormous conviction, novel methodologies which they would not have tolerated themselves for five minutes from teachers of driving, skiing or the trumpet.

Books for teachers proliferated; in my memory, they have become one impenetrable tome called 'The communicative teaching of language as communication in the communicative classroom'. Our job, we discovered, was no longer to teach English, but to train learners in the interactive interpretive and expressive skills and strategies required for negotiating meaning and assigning contextually-determined values in real time to elements of the linguistic code, while attending not only to the detailed surface features of discourse but also to the pragmatic communicative semiotic macro-context. I now decided that if I couldn't understand a professional book, perhaps it wasn't my fault after all.

Paris is never a hostile environment to a prophet with a message, and fringe religions such as Silent Way, Suggestopaedia and Counselling Learning flourished, especially in the private sector. Some merged imperceptibly into DIY New Age psychotherapy, so that you could simultaneously learn a language, remodel your personality and find true happiness.

It was a bewildering time for teachers. Some embraced one faith and stuck to it. Many adopted a confused eclecticism, feeling that if you threw enough kinds of mud, some would stick. Others (including many state school teachers) went on doing what they were doing before, but called it 'communicative' if anybody was listening.

In retrospect, I have a sense of an opportunity missed. Our handling of the new insights and research findings was often exaggerated and naive; none the less, we had made enormous progress. Our knowledge of both formal and functional aspects of language, our growing understanding of acquisitional processes, and our vastly improved methodology and materials, provided all the necessary ingredients for a balanced and effective model of instructed second-language learning. In practice, however, we probably threw away on the swings most of what we had gained on the roundabouts. The new interest in learner-centred, naturalistic, activity-based learning was allowed to fill the horizon, so that teaching language was all too easily replaced by doing things with it. All these years later, I believe we are still paying the price.

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