

# PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE IN TESOL

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## BASIC PRINCIPLES

The principles underlying how we teach English should be derived from how we see language, how we see language learning, and how we see teaching:

### View of language:

- inventory of rules/structures? \*\*\*\*\*  
                                  a      b  
                                  \*      \*
- inventory of functional items?       \* c \*  
  \* \*  
  \*
- discourse: language in use?
- other?

### View of lang. learning:

- mastery of structures one by one?
- gradual approximation to standard usage?
- formal learning?
- functional acquisition?
- other

### View of teaching:

- instruction?
- training?
- management of learning?
- counselling?
- other?

Unfortunately, it is easier to say that our teaching should be based on principles derived from these "views" than actually to achieve this.

To begin with, what we are looking at is not a static panorama. Because of continual developments in theory, research, and the interpretation of everyday experience, the answers to the questions posed in the above diagram change over time. For

example, there was a time when most course designers and teachers would confidently have said:

- a. Language = groups of grammatical and other rules (e.g. for the Simple Present Tense).
- b. Language learning = mastery of groups of rules (i.e. memorization and application).
- c. Teaching = instruction/training (i.e. exposition, organization of exercises and some "free" practice).

Then there is the persistent divorce between theory and practice - persistent in all realms of life. We may have fairly clear ideas of what makes a good parent, citizen, teacher, but somehow we fail to put the ideas fully into practice. This is sometimes a failure to "connect": theory and practice are compartmentalized. Sometimes it is a lack of faith: "It would never work..." Sometimes it is the sheer inertia of established habits and systems. Sometimes it is a recognition of overwhelming circumstances: "That's the way in theory, but with 60 kids in a class..."

A realistic awareness of such problems is fundamental to implementing change in ourselves and in the institutions we work in. However, the starting point must be a reassessment of our views of:

- a. language,
- b. language learning,
- c. teaching.

## VIEW OF LANGUAGE

"Language is ....." [Complete with whatever you agreed on in your last teachers' course or seminar.]

How about this? - Language is a complex but flexible system of communication, oral and written.

It exists in potential as a system of conventions in the minds of the speakers of a language.

It occurs in reality as discourse, a sequence of communicative acts, in conversations, speeches, songs, letters, novels, notices, and so on. Different accounts of language, and of different languages, are presented in linguistic theses, grammar books, and dictionaries, but the vast majority of the speakers of languages have little or no knowledge of these.

If we agree with this, there are fairly clear implications for our teaching. However, in practice, most teachers still view a language as an inventory of structures. This is the case even with most of those teachers who claim not to teach grammar: they may teach through dialogues, for example, but the dialogue this class is loaded with Simple Present Tense sentences, and the teacher is well aware that the Simple Present Tense is this week's major teaching

point - and the students are soon equally aware.

How, then, as teachers of English as a foreign language, should we view the language (the system of systems - phonology, lexis, grammar, semantics, pragmatics)? How should we encourage our students to see it?

1. We can show them rules. Most experienced teachers (and successful adolescent or adult language learners) would agree that rules can help us see how bits of a language work. But rules are a long way from real language in use.
2. We can show them phrase and sentence patterns, and indicate slots for substitutions. The patterns can be presented in contexts to indicate potential meanings and communicative functions. Most trained teachers would agree that this is as good a way as any to set a new bit of language rolling. It allows us to take students straight into the comprehension and production of utterances, with their meaning, grammar, phonology all more or less intact. We can focus in on an aspect of meaning, grammar or phonology to make it clearer, and even suggest a rule if we like.

However, all that said, real language is much more than an inventory of patterns, and real language in use is much more than the repetition of a pattern or a group of patterns.

3. We can show students expressions and patterns with which to perform common communicative functions. The functions themselves are universal categories (you can "greet", "request information", "invite", "complain", etc., in any language), so what we need to show is the forms that can be used to perform these functions in a specific language. That takes us back to the patterns referred to in 2 above. However, we are now looking at them in terms of their communicative use, not their grammatical construction. Many teachers feel it is better to help learners see communicatively useful bits of language rather than whole areas of grammar. Most successful learners would probably agree that seeing certain expressions and patterns in terms of their typical uses has helped them considerably.

However, this view again offers an inventory (expressions and patterns classified in abstract categories - communicative functions), and language is much more than an inventory. Also, it does not give coherent picture of the formal systems of the language (e.g. the grammar) and the infinite potential they have to generate different sentences. Nor does it suggest the diverse communicative potential of expressions and patterns, and language in general: "Would you like + Noun Phrase?" could be presented as a pattern for offering ("Would you like a drink?"), but it could also be used to threaten ("Would you

like a flat nose?"), to enquire ("Would you like a single room?"), and so on. Seeing a functional description of a conversation (Greeting - Response to greeting/Enquiry after well-being - Response to enquiry/Enquiry after well-being of interlocutor and family - Response to enquiry/Phatic observation on the weather - Phatic agreement/Change of topic to invitation - Excuse/.....) is not likely help many learners; it is too abstract and laborious an approach.

4. We can show them models of typical discourse (job interview, airport announcement, friendly letter, and so on) and how these can be modified by substitution, addition and omission of elements. With a well-established context, these models allow us to take learners straight into comprehension and production of discourse with its integrity more or less intact. It may be as close as we can get to real language in use while keeping the language used highly predictable, and it can lead on to discussions, simulations, compositions, and so on, in which we virtually let the discourse and the language used flow unhindered. Most successful language learners will probably agree that proficiency in certain typical stretches of discourse (street directions, shopping, restaurant ordering/paying, first-meeting conversations, and so on) has provided them with important stepping stones towards unrestricted participation in discourse.

We certainly do want learners to see language as a system of systems used to create discourse. However, unless they can see how the elements of the discourse (e.g. expressions and language patterns) work formally and functionally, they will see the models as rigid text rather than as living discourse. Anyone who has done a bit of acting knows the problem of bringing text to life - and the problem of improvising when you forget the lines.

Summary:

1. Rules can sometimes help learners to see how bits of language work, but patterns and substitutions probably provide a more practical view of the formal systems of a language.
2. Learners can also be helped if they see the communicative functions of bits of language (expressions and patterns).
3. In the final analysis, however, learners must see language as discourse. They can be helped in this by-seeing models of typical discourse, but they can take advantage of these only if they see how the elements of a model can be changed.

VIEW OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

The verb "see" has been used repeatedly in the discussion of views of language. Seeing is not learning, as is borne out by the well-known illocution: "Pero, maestro, esto ya lo vi."

Language learning is a fairly slow process.

Most teachers' views of language learning approximate to one of the following:

1. Traditional cognitivism: understanding of rules/ structures > learning by heart > application in exercises > regular revision > application in real communicative language use.
2. Behaviourism: Perception of models of rules/ structures > imitation feedback (positive or negative > further imitation (unmodified or modified according to feedback) > substitution of elements in the models > feedback > further substitution and combination, continuing in real communicative use of language.
3. Neo-cognitivism: Exposure to real discourse > comprehension of some of this > perception of some features of form > hypothesis formation > experimentation feedback and modification of hypothesis > further experimentation/ hypothesis formation/ development of competence as exposure to and participation in real discourse continues.

Students seem to learn quite a lot when any of these views of language learning underlies teaching - if the teaching is skillful, if the learning strategies imposed on the students are personally congenial to them, if the students feel reasonably happy and motivated in the class, and if the students get practice in actually using the language for communication.



This suggests that an eclectic approach is wisest with groups of students, and most experienced teachers would agree with that, but there is still a world of difference between a course in which 75% or more of the time is spent on essentially grammatical work (grammar exposition, drilling, written back-up exercises, grammatically loaded substitution dialogues, grammatically restricted information-gap exercises, and so) and a course in which the language is the medium, not the focus of the activity (realistic listening and reading comprehension, role-play and simulation, real conversation, discussion, letter-writing, and so on). Language-focussed activities are often referred to as "accuracy" work, and communication-focussed activities as "fluency" work. Most courses in English as a foreign language are heavily weighted towards accuracy work.

Because of theory, research, and (very important) personal experience, we can be quite dogmatic about a number of aspects of foreign language learning:

1. Learning to communicate effectively in the language will not develop much unless the learner gets sufficient exposure to natural discourse and opportunities to participate in natural discourse, whether this be inside or outside the classroom. As teachers in a foreign language context (our students have few opportunities to practice English out-side the classroom), we should make sure there is plenty of exposure to and opportunities to participate in natural discourse in the classroom - plenty of fluency practice.

2. Anything difficult in the language is acquired (or at least mastered for accurate production) later than easier items or areas. This is true of verb inflections, gender, object pronouns, the subjunctive, etc., in Spanish, and and of the simple (ha!) tenses, possessives, word order, etc., in English. It is true for children learning a first language as well as for adults learning a second language (where it is further complicated by L1 interference). It was or is true for us - you and me - in our learning of English or Spanish, whichever is our second language (and if you had the fortune of being a child bilingual, there was still a time when you said "poni" or "puse" in Spanish and "putted" for "put" in English). This phenomenon is an aspect of what has been called "the natural syllabus", which we can modify only slightly with our teaching syllabus. We know as teachers that most intermediate students will make Simple Tense errors however long we spent on drilling, correction and remedial work in the basic courses - yet we still insist on spending most time in the basic courses on precisely that accuracy work (drilling, correction, drilling, correcting), rather than on fluency work.
3. Seeing, and even understanding, the form and use of a new pattern, etc. is not the same as internalizing it, and one presentation and practice period is not usually sufficient for the new item to be learnt permanently. This is triply true for the difficult items mentioned above. What is more, the view of a new item should change as more items are learnt: there is no way the students can grasp the range and restrictions in the use

of the Simple Present until they are familiar with the Present Progressive, Present Perfect, etc., or grasp the full meaning of "finger" until they are familiar with the word "toe". Piaget's concept of learning as assimilation (rarely an instant process) and accommodation (re-organisation of previous learning) is useful here.

4. In second language learning, at least after a certain age, errors often become fossilised. They are then extremely difficult to erradicate.

There are a number of important implications for our teaching here:

1. The big-bash approach to the introduction of new language especially with difficult items, is unrealistic and usually achieves only the temporary appearance of success at best. Our students will still make errors in the Simple Tenses, etc., at intermediate level, no matter how long we spend on presentation and drilling when the items are first presented. Prolonged drilling will affect the students' attitude towards English more than their long-term learning of it. Many course books now share this view and, for example, introduce the Simple Present Tense little by little, first through expressions ("What do you do?" "I'm a student."), then through a small set of patterns ("Where do you live/work/study?" "Where does she live/work/study?" "In/At ..."), and only then (weeks, or even months, later) is the full grammatical picture completed. This is in the nature of a cyclical or spiral syllabus.
2. We should weight the activities in our classes more

towards discourse than isolated sentences, and more towards fluency than accuracy, even at the basic level. This means that we should move more quickly and more consistently from presentation and drilling to extended listening and reading to substitution dialogues and role play, to parallel and free composition.

3. On the one hand, we should expect basic errors at intermediate and even advanced levels, but on the other hand, be prepared to deal with them and limit the ravages of fossilisation. Perhaps we should think much more about communication at the basic levels, and about error correction and remedial work at intermediate and advanced levels.

Summary:

1. Students may use a variety of strategies in learning. For this reason we should be eclectic in our teaching, but our main strategies should be habit-formation work (drills, repetitive dialogues and information gaps, games, etc.), and activities in which students can learn the language by using it fairly freely (role-plays, problem-solving, L.C., R.C., etc.).
2. Attitudes, feelings, and motivational factors are crucial to language learning.
3. Accuracy work should always lead to fluency work as quickly as possible. This requires very efficient presentation and drilling. Both fluency and accuracy should be aimed at throughout, but fluency is the primary goal.

4. With respect to accuracy, we should remember that few language items are mastered instantly, and difficult items are usually acquired naturally after they are introduced in our teaching syllabuses. They cannot be mastered just through a clear presentation and a long period of drilling. They require a cyclical approach extending right up to intermediate level, as well as lots of use in fluency activities.
5. There is a danger in foreign language learning of error fossilisation. Special attention should be paid to the eradication of basic errors at the upper intermediate and advanced levels. Without this, skills development is largely futile, with products like a beautifully organised business letter riddled with basic errors in English.

#### VIEW OF TEACHING

"Teach" and "Learn" are complementary verbs, but few experienced teachers would maintain that there is a one-to-one relationship between them. Sadly, some teachers teach without their students learning. Happily, many people learn without teachers. Students seldom learn all and only what their teachers teach.

As every up-to-date teacher knows, late-twentieth-century classes should be learner-centred, not teacher-centred. This may not be always be totally possible (even the expectations of our students sometimes impede it). However, we can cater to our group's and individual students' interests. We can elicit ideas and involve students at virtually all stages of a class. And we must

do a lot of pair and group work if we are going to engage all students in sufficient habit-formation activities (question-answer and other drills, including repetitive information gaps) and sufficient fluency activities (role-plays, problem-solving, and so on). Finally, we should be available for some individual counselling if possible.

In general we should try to facilitate learning, sometimes by making a presentation or controlling a drill from centre-stage, sometimes by discretely supervising pair or group work and being available for consultation, sometimes by returning composition homework individually.

And, of course, we should bear in mind what we have said about language and language learning.

#### EPILOGUE

These views of language, language learning, and teaching, and the principles and practical implications based on them, are drawn largely in a vacuum, in the abstract. They are drawn with adolescents and adults in secondary school class, for example? A twice weekly class with 60 reluctant students?

I would say that difficult conditions do not invalidate the views, the principles, the practical implications. They simply influence the degree of real language learning that will occur in a given class. Very few students ("irrepressible learners" only) will learn much English in groups of 50 or 60 largely reluctant students with infrequent classes. I have written on this topic in this Journal and elsewhere.

What happens when we are working with real students, not just talking about "adolescents and adults" in the abstract? With business people, for example, or with children? Here we should make certain adjustments. In the case of business people, we should take their high motivation (urgency?) into account, and their probable ability (or determination) to manage their time and activities better than the average student. Teaching children, especially young children, really requires a separate discussion. However, it is worth saying briefly here that the principles still apply in general (perhaps even more so!):

1. For children, language should be treated as a repertoire of expressions (words, phrases, utterances) or short stretches of discourse (rhymes, dialogues, songs), and not as grammatical patterns (and certainly not as grammatical rules). The language should have concrete reference: objects, pictures, or actions.
2. There should be no drilling in the normal sense (intended to establish grammatical patterns and substitutions). Instead there will be chanting and repetitive activities. Children must enjoy the chanting and other activities in themselves, not do them in order to learn the language (they will have no such abstract ambition, but they can enjoy the sing-song rhythm of a chant).
3. Children's classes should be almost totally activity-based. Children cannot learn by "studying", only by doing. There should be frequent changes of activity,

and the children should be given a lot of physical freedom (opportunities to move about).

Finally, I should confess that there is no way I can solve all your teaching problems, since I cannot solve all my own. However, I do believe that discussions such as this can help us all, and I hope this one has helped you.

Credits: Ellis, R. Understanding Second Language Acquisition, 1983.