English Language Teaching in the "Post-Method" Era: Toward Better Diagnosis, Treatment, and Assessment

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INTRODUCTION

In the century spanning the mid-1880s to the mid-1980s, the language teaching profession was involved in what many pedagogical experts would call a search. That search was for a single, ideal method, generalizable across widely varying audiences, that would successfully teach students a foreign language in the classroom. Historical accounts of the profession tend, therefore, to describe a succession of methods, each of which is more or less discarded in due course as a new method takes its place. I will comment on "the changing winds and shifting sands" (Marckwardt, 1972, p. 5) of that history momentarily; but first, we should try to understand what we mean by *method.*

What is a method? More than three decades ago, Edward Anthony (1963) gave us a definition that has quite admirably withstood the test of time. His concept of method was the second of three hierarchical elements, namely, *approach, method,* and *technique.* An approach, according to Anthony, was a set of assumptions dealing with the nature of language, learning, and teaching. Method was defined as an overall plan for systematic presentation of language based on a selected approach. It followed that techniques were specific classroom activities consistent with a method, and therefore in harmony with an approach as well.

Some disagreement over Anthony's definition can occasionally be found in the literature. For Richards and Rodgers (1986), method was an umbrella term to capture redefined approaches, designs, and procedures. Similarly, Prabhu (1990) thought of method as both classroom activities and the theory that informs them. Despite these and a handful of other attempted redefinitions (see Pennycook, 1989), we still commonly refer to methods in terms of Anthony's earlier understanding. For most researchers and practicing teachers, a method is a set of theoretically unified classroom techniques thought to be generalizable across a wide variety of contexts and audiences. Thus, for example, we speak of the

Audiolingual Method, the Direct Method, and of the Silent Way or Suggestopedia, all as methods.

METHODS: A CENTURY-OLD OBSESSION

Ironically, the whole concept of separate methods is no longer a central issue in language teaching practice (see Kumaravadivelu, 1994, among others). In fact, in the mid-1980s, H. H. Stern (1985, p. 251) lamented our "century-old obsession," our "prolonged preoccupation [with methods] that has been increasingly unproductive and misguided," as we vainly searched for the ultimate method that would serve as the final answer.

That search might be said to have begun around 1880 with François Gouin's publication of *The Art of Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages* (1880), in which his Series Method was advocated. This was followed at the turn of the century by the Direct Method of Charles Berlitz. The Audiolingual Method of the late 1940s and the so-called Cognitive-Code Learning Method of the early 1960s followed. Then, in a burst of innovation, the "spirited seventies," as I like to refer to them, brought us what David Nunan (1989) termed the "designer" methods: Community Language Learning, the Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response, and others. This latter flurry was not unlike an earlier period in the field of psychotherapy which burgeoned with a plethora of "methods" of therapy; some of the "designer" terms of that era were *T group, encounter group, analytical, Gestalt, marathon group, conjoint family, shock, client-centered,* and *narcosis therapy, electro-narcosis, biochemotherapy,* and *analytic psychobiology*!

Why are methods no longer the milestones of our language teaching journey through time? Our requiem for methods might list four possible causes of demise:

1. Methods are too prescriptive, assuming too much about a context before the context has even been identified. They are therefore overgeneralized in their potential application to practical situations.

2. Generally, methods are quite distinctive at the early, beginning stages of a language course and rather indistinguishable from each other at later stages. In the first few days of a Community Language Learning class, for example, the students witness a unique set of experiences in their small circles of translated language whispered in their ears. But, within a matter of weeks, such classrooms can look like any other learner-centered curriculum.

3. It was once thought that methods could be empirically tested by scientific quantification to determine which one is "best." We have now discovered that something as artful and intuitive as language pedagogy cannot ever be so clearly verified by empirical validation.

4. Methods are laden with what Pennycook (1989) referred to as "interested knowledge" – the quasi-political or mercenary agendas of their proponents. Recent work in the power and politics of English language teaching (see, especially, Pennycook, 1994; Tollefson, 1995; and Holliday, 1994) has demonstrated that methods, often the creations of the powerful "center," become vehicles of a "linguistic imperialism" (Phillipson, 1992) targeting the disempowered periphery.

David Nunan (1991, p. 228) summed it up nicely:

> It has been realised that there never was and probably never will be a method for all, and the focus in recent years has been on the development of

classroom tasks and activities which are consonant with what we know about second language acquisition, and which are also in keeping with the dynamics of the classroom itself.

A PRINCIPLED APPROACH

And so, as we lay to rest the methods that have become so familiar to us in recent decades, what assurance do we have today of the viability of our language teaching profession?

Through the 1970s and into the early 1980s, there was a good deal of hoopla about the "designer" methods. Even though they were not widely adopted standards of practice, they were nevertheless symbolic of a profession at least partially caught up in a mad scramble to invent a new method when the very concept of method was eroding under our feet. We did not need a new method. We needed, instead, to get on with the business of unifying our *approach*[1] to language teaching and of designing effective tasks and techniques informed by that approach.

By the end of the 1980s, such an approach was clearly becoming evident in teaching practices worldwide. We had learned some profound lessons from our past wanderings. We had learned to make enlightened choices of teaching practices that were solidly grounded in the best of what we knew about second language learning and teaching. We had amassed enough research on learning and teaching in a multiplicity of contexts that we were indeed formulating an integrated approach to language pedagogy. Of course, we had not attained a theoretical mountaintop by any means; much remained – and still remains – to be questioned and investigated.

It should be clear from the foregoing that, as "enlightened" teachers, we can think in terms of a number of possible methodological – or, shall we say, pedagogical – options at our disposal for tailoring classes to particular contexts. Our approach – or theory of language and language learning – therefore takes on great importance. One's approach to language teaching is the theoretical rationale that underlies everything that happens in the classroom. It is the cumulative body of knowledge and principles that enables teachers, as "technicians" in the classroom, to diagnose the needs of students, to treat students with successful pedagogical techniques, and to assess the outcome of those treatments.

An approach to language pedagogy is not just a set of static principles "set in stone." It is, in fact, a dynamic composite of energies within a teacher that changes (or should change, if one is a growing teacher) with continued experience in learning and teaching. There is far too much that we do not know collectively about this process, and there are far too many new research findings pouring in, to assume that a teacher can confidently assert that he or she knows everything that needs to be known about language and language learning.

One teacher's approach may, of course, differ on various issues from that of a colleague, or even of "experts" in the field, who differ among themselves. There are two reasons for variation at the approach level: (1) an approach is by definition dynamic and therefore subject to some "tinkering" as a result of one's observation and experience; and (2) research in second language acquisition and pedagogy almost always yields findings that are subject to interpretation rather than giving conclusive evidence.

The interaction between one's approach and classroom practice is the key to dynamic teaching. The best teachers are able to take calculated risks in the classroom: as new student needs are perceived, innovative pedagogical techniques are attempted, and the follow-up assessment yields an observed judgment on their effectiveness. Initial inspiration for such innovation comes from the approach level, but the feedback that teachers gather from actual implementation then reshapes and modifies their overall understanding of what learning and teaching are – which, in turn, may give rise to a new insight and more innovative possibilities, and the cycle continues.

TWELVE PRINCIPLES

I would like to suggest that viable current approaches to language teaching are "principled," in that there is perhaps a finite number of general research-based principles on which classroom practice is grounded. The twelve principles that I list and define in this section (see Brown, 1994a, for a complete discussion with definitions and examples) are an inexhaustive number of what I would assert to be relatively widely accepted thoretical assumptions about second language acquisition. There is sometimes disagreement in their interpretation and their application in the classroom, but they nevertheless comprise a body of constructs which few would dispute as central to most language acquisition contexts. They are briefly summarized here.

1. AUTOMATICITY

Efficient second language learning involves a timely movement of the control of a few language forms into the automatic processing of a relatively unlimited number of language forms. Overanalyzing language, thinking too much about its forms, and consciously lingering on rules of language all tend to impede this graduation to automaticity.

2. MEANINGFUL LEARNING

Meaningful learning will lead toward better long-term retention than rote learning. One among many examples of meaningful learning is found in content-centered approaches to language teaching.

3. THE ANTICIPATION OF REWARD

Human beings are universally driven to act, or "behave," by the anticipation of some sort of reward – tangible or intangible, short-term or long-term – that will ensue as a result of the behavior. Although long-term success in language learning requires a more intrinsic motive (see 4 below), the power of immediate rewards in a language class is undeniable. One of the tasks of the teacher is to create opportunities for those moment-by-moment rewards that can keep classrooms interesting, if not exciting.

4. INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Sometimes, reward-driven behavior is dependent on extrinsic (externally administered by someone else) motivation. But a more powerful category of reward is one which is intrinsically driven within the learner. When behavior stems from needs, wants, or desires within oneself, the behavior itself has the potential to be self-rewarding. In such a context, externally administered rewards are unnecessary; learners are likely to maintain the behavior beyond the immediate presence of teachers, parents, and other tutors.

5. STRATEGIC INVESTMENT

Successful mastery of the second language will be, to a large extent, the result of a learner's own personal "investment" of time, effort, and attention to the second language in the form of an individualized battery of strategies for comprehending and producing the language.

6. LANGUAGE EGO

As human beings learn to use a second language, they develop a new mode of thinking, feeling, and acting – a second identity. The new "language ego," intertwined with the second language, can easily create within the learner a sense of fragility, defensiveness, and a raising of inhibitions.

7. SELF-CONFIDENCE

The eventual success that learners attain in a task is partially a factor of their belief that they indeed are fully capable of accomplishing the task. Self-esteem, at least global self-esteem, lies at the roots of eventual attainment.

8. RISK TAKING

Successful language learners, in their realistic appraisal of themselves as vulnerable beings yet capable of accomplishing tasks, must be willing to become "gamblers" in the game of language, to attempt to produce and to interpret language that is a bit beyond their absolute certainty.

9. THE LANGUAGE—CULTURE CONNECTION

Whenever you teach a language, you also teach a complex system of cultural customs, values, and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

10. THE NATIVE LANGUAGE EFFECT

The native language of learners will be a highly significant system on which learners will rely to predict the target-language system. Although that native system will exercise both facilitating and interfering (positive and negative transfer) effects on the production and comprehension of the new language, the interfering effects are likely to be the most salient.

11. INTERLANGUAGE

Second language learners tend to go through a systematic or quasi-systematic developmental process as they progress to full competence in the target language. Successful interlanguage development is partially a factor of utilizing feedback from others. Teachers in language classrooms can provide such feedback, but more important, can help learners to generate their own feedback outside of the language classroom.

12. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Given that communicative competence is the goal of a language classroom, instruction needs to point toward all of its components: organizational, pragmatic, strategic, and psychomotoric. Communicative goals are best achieved by giving due attention to language use and not just usage, to fluency and not just accuracy, to authentic language and contexts, and to students' eventual need to apply classroom learning to heretofore unrehearsed contexts in the real world.

DIAGNOSIS, TREATMENT, AND ASSESSMENT

A principled approach to language teaching encourages the language teacher to engage in a carefully crafted process of diagnosis, treatment, and assessment. It enables us initially to account for communicative and situational needs anticipated among designated learners, and to diagnose appropriate curricular treatment for those specific learners in their distinctive context and for their particular goals. It helps us then to devise effective pedagogical objectives which have taken into account all the contextual variables in a classroom. A sound, comprehensive approach underlies the creation of a set of learning experiences that are appropriate, given specific contexts and purposes, for realizing established objectives. It enables teachers to assess what went right and what went wrong in a lesson, that is, to systematically evaluate the accomplishment of curricular objectives. And it assists them in revising activities, lessons, materials, and curricula.

DIAGNOSIS

The first phase of the diagnostic stage of language pedagogy begins with curricular plans and continues as an ongoing monitoring process in the classroom. Language curricula call for an initial study of what Richards (1990) calls "situational" needs, or the context of the teaching. Situational needs include consideration of the country of the institution, the socioeconomic and educational background of the students, the specific purposes the students have in learning a language, and institutional constraints that are imposed on a curriculum. Some of the twelve principles cited earlier come into play in isolating situational needs:

- Is language proficiency perceived by students as intrinsically motivating?
- To what extent will the language in question involve students in wrestling with a "new identity" and therefore imply a language ego issue?
- What is the relationship between the target language and the native culture of the students?

A host of other educational, sociological, and administrative principles come to bear in specifying situational needs; these are but a few.

The second phase of curricular development is typified by the specification of linguistic — sometimes called "communicative" — needs: the specific language forms and functions that should be programmed into a course of study. Here again, certain principles of learning and teaching inform our choices:

- To what extent are native-language and target-language contrasts important to consider?
- How should interlanguage systematicity and variation affect curriculum designs?
- What do studies of contrastive analysis, interlanguage, and communicative competence tell us about the sequencing of linguistic forms and functions in a curriculum?
- How can the curriculum realize the principle of authenticity?

Of equal importance in the planning stages of language courses is the specific diagnostic assessment of each student upon entering a program. Once courses have been carefully planned, with pedagogical options intricately woven in, how can teachers and/or administrators become diagnostic scientists and artists, carefully eliciting language production and comprehension on the part of every student? How should those elicitations be measured and assessed in such a way that the language course can be either slightly or greatly modified to meet the needs of the particular students who happen to be in one's class at this moment? None of these complex questions can be answered with the language teaching profession's recently interred methods! The crucial import of the diagnostic phase of language courses precludes any consideration of methods that are prepackaged for delivery to all learners. One of the principal fields of inquiry in the profession today is this very stage of diagnosis, that of more adequately pinpointing learners' linguistic needs as they enter a program of study.

TREATMENT

One may be tempted to think of "treatment" as the appropriate stage for the application of methods. One can still find people arguing, for example, that if a diagnostic phase discovered learners who need a great deal of physical activity, little metalinguistic explanation, and a strongly directive teacher, then surely Total Physical Response (TPR) is the treatment

that should be offered. The problem with this conclusion is that it is over-generalized and much too restrictive. Certain learners can indeed benefit from occasional doses of "TPR-like" techniques, but certainly the complexity of the second language acquisition process warrants a multiple-treatment, multiphase approach to a language course. The principles that collectively underlie the method as we knew them provide a few valid correlates of an approach to diagnosis and treatment, but a single method covers far too narrow a band of possibilities to suffice for a whole curriculum.

Second language "treatments" may be thought of as courses of study or, better, sets of learning experiences, designed to target learner needs exposed by diagnostic assessments. For such treatments, the profession offers an extraordinarily large number of options. Consider, just as a start, the thirty-eight language teaching techniques categorized by Crookes and Chaudron (1991, pp. 52–54), ranging from controlled (drills, dialogues, reading aloud, display questions/answers, etc.) to semicontrolled (referential questions/answers, cued narratives, information gap activities, etc.) to free (role-plays, problem solving, interviews, discussions, etc.). Consider as well an abundance of whole-class, group-work, and pair-work activities at our disposal. Then, just take a look at the mountain of textbooks and other materials represented at a major language teaching conference! It is the teacher's task to carefully and deliberately choose among these many options to formulate a pedagogical sequence of techniques in the classroom. And this is where a teacher's choices must be "principled."

One way of looking at principled choices for treatment is the extent to which a technique promotes a desired goal. For example, let's suppose a teacher wishes to deliver techniques that seek to create *intrinsic motivation* in learners. The principle of intrinsic motivation implies more than a few corollaries that can act as a "test" of a technique's potential for creating or sustaining intrinsic motivation (see Brown 1994b, pp.33–46, for a full development of intrinsic motivation in the classroom). Consider the following checklist, each item of which represents a facet of the principle of intrinsic motivation:

1. Does the technique appeal to the genuine interests of your students? Is it relevant to their lives?

2. Is the technique presented in a positive, enthusiastic manner?

3. Are students clearly aware of the purpose of the technique?

4. Do students have some choice in: (*a*) choosing some aspect of the technique? and/or (*b*) determining how they go about fulfilling the goals of the technique?

5. Does the technique encourage students to discover for themselves certain principles or rules (rather than simply being "told")?

6. Does it encourage students in some way to develop or use effective strategies of learning and communication?

7. Does it contribute – at least to some extent – to students' ultimate autonomy and independence (from you)?

8. Does it foster cooperative negotiation with other students in the class? Is it a truly interactive technique?

9. Does the technique present a "reasonable challenge"?

10. Do students receive sufficient feedback on their performance (from each other or from you)?

By the careful delivery of techniques that incorporate many of these criteria, teachers can be more assured of offering treatments that are specifically designed to accomplish the goal of fostering intrinsic motivation. This is a far more sophisticated and effective option

than grabbing at a particular method and programming it into a course of study regardless of diagnosed student needs.

Another way of looking at the relationship between approach and treatment is illustrated in the following list of suggestions for building a sense of *strategic investment* in the classroom. Each of the ten considerations is a principle of language learning/teaching which is reasonably well accepted (see Brown 1994b, pp.189–215). They are "good language learner" characteristics that we would all be wise to foster among students in second language classrooms. Each principle implies certain activities that may be appropriate.

1. LOWER INHIBITIONS

Play guessing and communication games; do role-plays and skits; sing songs; use group work; laugh with your students; have them share fears in small groups.

2. ENCOURAGE RISK TAKING

Praise students for making sincere efforts to try out language; use fluency exercises where errors are not corrected at that time; give outside-of-class assignments to speak or write or otherwise try out the language.

3. BUILD STUDENTS' SELF-CONFIDENCE

Tell students explicitly (verbally and nonverbally) that you do indeed believe in them; have them make lists of their strengths, of what they know or have accomplished so far in the course.

4. HELP STUDENTS DEVELOP INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Remind students explicitly about the rewards for learning English; describe (or have students look up) jobs that require English; play down the final examination in favor of helping students to see rewards for themselves beyond the final exam.

5. PROMOTE COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Direct students to share their knowledge; play down competition among students; get your class to think of themselves as a team; do a considerable amount of small-group work.

6. ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO USE RIGHT-BRAIN PROCESSING

Use movies and tapes in class; have students read passages rapidly; do skimming exercises; do rapid "free writes"; do oral fluency exercises where the object is to get students to talk (or write) a lot without being corrected.

7. PROMOTE AMBIGUITY TOLERANCE

Encourage students to ask you, and each other, questions when they do not understand something; keep your theoretical explanations very simple and brief; d   vith just a few rules at a time; occasionally you can resort to translation into a native la... age to clarify a word or meaning.

8. HELP STUDENTS USE THEIR INTUITION

Praise students for good guesses; do not always give explanations of errors – let a correction suffice; correct only selected errors, preferably just those that interfere with learning.

9. GET STUDENTS TO MAKE THEIR MISTAKES WORK FOR THEM

Tape-record students' oral production and get them to identify errors; let students catch and correct each other's errors; do not always give them the correct form; encourage students to make lists of their common errors and to work on them on their own.

10. GET STUDENTS TO SET THEIR OWN GOALS

Explicitly encourage or direct students to go beyond the classroom goals; have them make lists of what they will accomplish on their own in a particular week; get students to make specific time commitments at home to study the language; give "extra credit" work.

Here again, we see a practical example of the way a principled approach to language teaching consistently and directly leads to practical classroom techniques. Ten principled maxims or "rules" for good language learning can focus teachers on sound classroom practices.

ASSESSMENT

Finally, our requiem for methods has propelled us into a new and fruitful domain of language pedagogy, namely, improved approaches and techniques for assessing students' accomplishment of curricular objectives. The methods of old offered nothing in the way of assessment techniques; at the very best they may have implied a continuing process of assessment as the method is being practiced. Today, the language-testing field has mushroomed into a highly developed and sophisticated field with numerous facets.

One of these facets is the increased emphasis on ongoing assessment of students' performance as a course progresses, or, what has commonly been called *formative evaluation*. With the advent of techniques for performance-based assessment, portfolio development, oral production inventories, cooperative student-student techniques, and other authentic testing rubrics, we are quickly developing the capacity to provide an ongoing program of assessment throughout a student's course of study. With formative processes of assessment in place, teachers can make appropriate midcourse pedagogical changes to more effectively reach goals.

The notion that evaluation must be confined to summative, end-of-term or end-of-unit tests alone is vanishing. However, it is important to note that summative evaluation is also an important component of a language program. The difference between current summative testing philosophy and the presupposition behind methods – that "one size fits all" – can be seen in a wide variety of assessment batteries that cover both production and comprehension skills, a range of assessment tasks, individualized (including computer-adaptive) tests, and increased attention to the communicative properties of tests.

CONCLUSION

"Methods," as we historically understand the term in the profession, are not a relevant issue in the sophisticated process of diagnosing, treating, and assessing learners of foreign languages. We have emerged well beyond the dark ages of language teaching when a handful of prepackaged elixirs filled up a small shelf of options. Although traces of the principal ingredients of the old methods still effectively find their way into our array of pedagogical options for treatment, our profession has emerged into an era of understanding a vast number of language teaching contexts and purposes, and an even larger number of student needs, learning styles, and affective traits. As teachers and teacher trainees develop and carry out classroom techniques, they can benefit by grounding everything they do in well-established principles of language learning and teaching. In so doing, they will be less likely to bring a prepackaged – and possibly ineffective – method to bear, and more likely to be directly responsive to their students' purposes and goals.

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Endnote

[1] I use the term *approach* here in much the same way that Anthony (1963) used it: our collective wisdom on the nature of language, learning, and teaching. However, I part company with Anthony in assuming that method is in any way the next logical layer in a theory of language pedagogy.