Where do we go from here?
Method and pedagogy in language teaching

Penny Ur

Oranim Academic College of Education
Tivon, Israel

Abstract

Language-teaching methods such as audio-lingualism or task-based instruction have been promoted at different times as the 'best' way to teach a foreign language. Each such method prescribes a set of learning procedures rooted in a particular theoretical conceptualization of the nature of language and language acquisition, based on linguistic and applied linguistics research. It is suggested in this article that the principles guiding teachers in selecting procedures should not be dictated by any particular method recommended by researchers or theoreticians, but should be rather defined as a pedagogy of language teaching, shaped by various general pedagogical – not only language-learning – considerations, as well as by local factors, and determined by the teacher her- or himself.

Key words: language-teaching; method; methodology; pedagogy; constraints; teacher.

1. Language-teaching method

A language-teaching method may be defined as a coherent set of teaching-learning procedures and behaviours based on a theory of what language is and how it is learnt. Some examples are provided below, shown more or less in chronological order of their popularity over the years. It should be noted, however, that methods based on grammar translation have continued to be used worldwide, whereas the popularity of audio-lingualism was relatively short-lived. In fact, none of these, even at the height of their popularity, were ever actually implemented in their 'pure' form as specified here; but the descriptions provide a useful overview and guide to trends and movements over the years.

1.1. *Some prominent language-teaching methods*

1.1.1. *Grammar translation*

Grammar translation was the predominant method used for language teaching all over the world for most of the 20th century, though from 1950 onwards it was superseded in many places by audio-lingualism and, later, methods based on the communicative approach. It is probably the most well-known traditional language-teaching method, widely used up to the present day. Its rationale is that language is, essentially, a set of vocabulary items and grammatical structures, and that it is the forms and meanings of written, formal language, as defined in grammar books and dictionaries, which is the target variety. Language is to be learned, like many other subjects, by memorizing facts (grammatical rules, vocabulary items etc.) and implementing them in exercises, very often based on contrast with and translation into the mother tongue. Hence the main procedures used are grammatical explanations and exercises, the learning of bilingual vocabulary lists, translation exercises to and from the target language. The language is written and read, but spoken little if at all: hence most of the lesson is typically conducted in the learners' mother tongue. There is a clear emphasis on accuracy: correct grammar, spelling and punctuation.

1.1.2. *Audio-lingualism*

Audio-lingualism arose in the United States, partly as a reaction against the over-formal, cerebral nature of grammar translation, and was greatly influenced by the structuralist school of linguistics and by the learning theories of behaviourism. It stresses the teaching of oral, informal language rather than formal written, and sees language learning as a skill, rather like learning to play a musical instrument, acquired by reinforcement of successful performance through repetition. Classroom techniques include a large amount of learning by heart, mimicry and repetitive drills; there is no translation from L1, grammar explanations are not encouraged, and there is little explicit teaching of vocabulary. However, it is, perhaps not quite so different from grammar translation as appears at first sight: the main objective remains the production of correct sentences rather than successful communication; and grammar is still seen as the central aspect of language to be mastered.

1.1.3. **Task-based instruction**

Task-based instruction is the most prominent method associated with the communicative approach. It is based on the assumptions that language is primarily a means of communication, and that a second (or additional) language is learned essentially the same way as the first: through interaction with more proficient speakers and through intuitive or implicit cognitive processes, rather than explicit instructional procedures. It assumes that since the target is communication, procedures in the classroom should also emphasize communication; grammatical explanations and the learning of vocabulary lists are therefore seen as less valuable, and the main lesson components take the shape of communicative tasks: activities where the students are required to receive or convey meaningful messages in order to achieve a given objective. The teacher is seen primarily as a facilitator and monitor of communicative activity rather than as an instructor. The stress is on successful, fluent communication, in both speech and writing, rather than on the production of correct sentences.

2. A post-method era?

2.1. *Opposition in principle and practice to the concept of 'method' as a basis for language teaching*

In recent years, several voices have been raised in opposition to the concept of language teaching method (for example, Pennycook, 1989; Prabhu, 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Pishghadam & Mirzaee, 2008).

In the case of Pennycook, this was because of the political implications of top-down, native-speaker dominated methods unjustifiably imposed on teachers worldwide. Prabhu emphasized the teacher's 'sense of plausibility' as the optimal criterion for the choice of a methodology rather than a generally approved method. Kumaravadivelu suggested a set of 'macro-strategies', or overriding principles, rather than a set of procedures, thus providing for more teacher choice. Pishghadam and Mirzaee see method as an over-rigid framework imposed on the teacher, but disapprove of this not so much because of a political implication, but rather because they feel it is incompatible with a post-modernist approach, characterized by subjectivism, relativism, and freedom from pre-determined constraints.

There is some research evidence that method, in any case, is not the critical variable in successful teaching. Clarke et al. (1996) identified three outstanding teachers of early literacy in first-grade learners in elementary schools in Denver, Colorado. In all cases, the children in their classes were outperforming those in most other schools in the area; but the three teachers used three quite different methods. One was using traditional procedures that included dictations, tests, and learning

lists of words; the second was using the 'Whole language' approach; and the third was using a project method, creating classroom displays of subjects children had explored and written up. What they did have in common were qualities that we associate with good teaching of any subject: such things as personal authority and an orderly classroom process; consistent demands that students perform at a high level; respect and care for each individual student; an explicit set of values and rules implemented on a daily basis.

3. 'Method' in professional discourse today

In spite of all this, the concept of 'language-teaching method' is still predominant in professional discourse. In 2003, David Bell published an article entitled 'Method and post-method: Are they really so incompatible?' – and drew the conclusion that they were not. Similarly Waters (2012) demonstrated that there is still a strong strand of what he calls 'methodism' in the professional literature. The question therefore needs to be asked: Why, given the evidence and argument described in the previous section, do so many people still believe that 'method' should be the basis for successful language teaching?

I would suggest that one reason might be a matter of maintaining power in the hands of the traditional authorities such as universities and ministries, rather than handing it over to the practitioner; it is clear that if such bodies were deprived of the right to say how teachers should teach, much of their authority would be undermined. Another reason is that method is a very convenient basis for teacher-training programs and materials design, with ready-made recommended procedures and teaching strategies to be taught. A third possible cause is the modernist approach, still predominant today, that practice should grow out of a clear set of theoretical concepts and assumptions, rather than that practice and theory should interact within an organic process of professional development.

Thus task-based instruction, which is clearly a method by the definition provided at the beginning of this article, continues to be promoted, largely for the reasons given above. It has been defined by one writer as 'an emerging orthodoxy' (Carless, 2009: 66); and a large number of books and articles on language teaching published since 2000 include in their titles the words 'task-based' (e.g Ellis 2003; Leaver & Willis, 2004; Nunan, 2004; Robinson, 2011; Skehan, 2003).

4. Problems with task-based instruction

Task-based instruction, however, has encountered some opposition. Swan (2005) contends, based on both theoretical argument and research evidence, that it is inappropriate for the majority of language teachers in the world, who teach children

or adolescents in state schools for three or four hours a week. Hu (2002) and Carless (2009) have reservations about its application in Asian contexts; and there is substantial research evidence that explicit teaching of grammar and vocabulary may have a far more important function in successful second language learning than is recommended within a task-based method (e.g. Norris & Ortega, 2001; Laufer, 2005).

Some theorists have responded to these criticisms by moving towards a 'weaker' task-based model. Ellis, for example (2009: 221), suggests that 'task-based teaching need not be seen as an alternative to more traditional, form-focused approaches but can be used alongside them'. But then communicative tasks become only one component of a methodology, and it is arguable that this is no longer 'task-based instruction' at all. If not, then what is it?

The situation in many countries, as evidenced by personal discussion with teachers and teacher trainers in various places round the world, is that on the one hand a communicative task-based method is promoted in the literature, by the education ministry, and by teacher training programs and that on the other, most teachers in classrooms are in fact teaching 'eclectically', with a strong component of traditional explanations and practice, reminiscent of grammar-translation exercises and audio-lingual drills, side by side with occasional communicative tasks. The most popular textbooks are similar: they consist of plenty of explicit language work with the stress on 'getting it right'; reading texts with comprehension questions; and comparatively few activities that actually have students using the language for interpersonal communication.

Where do we go from here?

5. An alternative: language pedagogy

I would suggest that for all the reasons above we abandon a single recommended language teaching method, and adopt instead a model that I would term a *language pedagogy*. Such a pedagogy would be *principled* and *localized*, *determined by the teacher(s), informed by reflection on experience and other professional knowledge sources*.

5.1. *A language pedagogy*

This is a pedagogy, not a method because, unlike a method, it is not based primarily on assumptions as to the nature of language and theories of language acquisition, nor is it limited to a set of procedures that accord with these assumptions. Certainly it will be informed by linguistic and applied linguistic research (see under *informed by …* below), but the rationale for choice of appropriate procedures will be based at least as much, if not more, on general pedagogical considerations

that apply to the teaching of all subjects. These include factors such as classroom management, the arousal and maintenance of student motivation and interest, dealing with large and/or heterogeneous classes, the creation of a positive class-room climate, lesson planning, the use of homework, and so on.

5.2. *Principled*

A language pedagogy must be principled: it should not be opportunistic, or based on superficial goals like 'keeping the students busy' or 'getting through the text-book': teachers who claim to be 'eclectic' in their methodology should be clear as to why they choose to use the procedures they do.

The most important pedagogical principle is the achievement of good learning: I will prefer one procedure over another because in my judgement my students will learn more from it. Other criteria may come into play and occasionally even predominate: for example, I may take into account the degree to which an activity promotes educational values I believe in, or encourages student autonomy.

5.3. *Localized*

Many decisions on teaching principles and procedures will be based on considerations that are specific to the particular context in which the course is taking place. Chief among these are the nature and culture of learning of the student population; the teacher's own personality, talents and preferences; the goals of the course; the culture of the surrounding population; the influence of stakeholders such as parents, school principals, a ministry of education; the content and grading of any upcoming exams.

5.4. *Determined by the teacher*

It is in principle the teacher who decides on her or his own pedagogy and who selects materials; though some decisions may be taken together by a group of teachers working in the same institution. Certainly the right to take such autono-mous decisions is one of the essential rights of the professional, as contrasted with the mere technician (Ur, 2002); and it is based on the assumption that the teacher has the knowledge base that enables her or him to do so successfully (see the next item below).

5.5. *Informed by reflection on experience and other professional knowledge sources*

If asked 'what is the basis for your expertise in teaching', the majority of practitioners I have asked will respond that it is classroom experience; or, more precisely, reflection on that experience. There is some evidence from the literature on expertise that this is true also of other skilful professionals (Ericsson et al, 2006). Given basic talent, intelligence and motivation, it is the accumulation of thousands of hours of classroom practice that is the most essential factor enabling teachers to become thoroughly competent. Other knowledge sources cannot compensate for lack of experience; but they can certainly enhance the use a teacher can make of it, enabling him or her to reach a level of expertise at which she or he can not only perform successfully in her or his own classroom, but also advise and instruct other teachers. Such further sources include sharing with colleagues, feedback from students, information from courses and conferences, and the theoretical, practical and research literature on language teaching.

6. Conclusion

In a sense, this is what is happening anyway in many places. A classroom lesson is a closed, intimate framework, where it is rare for anyone other than the immediate participants (teacher and students) to be present. Teachers are, by the nature of the time and space within which they work, naturally autonomous. Few teachers are using a prescribed method; most teachers develop their own pedagogy.

Nevertheless, the claim that any 'method', including the currently popular task-based instruction, is an inappropriate basis for language teaching in most contexts needs to be made, loud and clear. The problem is not so much that teachers are blindly obeying the ordinances of methodologists – they are on the whole too sensible to do so. It is rather the uneasy dissonance in professional discourse growing out of the discrepancy between what the authorities are promoting as the recommended method and what is actually going on in the classroom. This leads to mutual recriminations: teachers are accused of being out of date, conservative, and uninformed; theoreticians and methodologists are seen by teachers as out of touch with the classroom and unrealistic.

The plea underlying this article is that teachers should be released from the pressure to use any particular method in their classrooms. Instead, teacher preparation programs should provide opportunities for entrants to the profession to learn about a variety of methods and types of classroom procedures, as well as to study current controversial issues, insights from research, and thinking. Practitioners should then have the right to make their own choices, and to teach the way they think is best for their students' learning.

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Author's address:

Department of Graduate Studies
Oranim Academic College of Education
Tivon,
Israel 36006
pennyur@gmail.com