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Language Teaching Methods

The concept of method has been in and out of fashion in the discourse on language teaching. Traditionally, foundational knowledge in language teaching was collected and codified in so-called method handbooks ("Methodiken," cf. the article by Armbrust and Viebrock). These contained, between two covers, all the knowledge and orientation a practising language teacher needed. With the advent of academic disciplines studying the teaching and learning of foreign languages attempts were made to replace the concept of method by a more theoretical and systematic perspective on language teaching (Schröder and Weller 1975; Stern 1983). More recently the so-called post-method condition has subjected methods to a radical critique claiming they are mere ideologies imposed on teachers. Method has therefore become a controversial if not out-dated concept. However, a look at everyday classroom practice shows that methods matter (Bell 2007), because they contain the relevant knowledge for addressing the demands of the teaching situation.

From a historical point of view methods often represent major schools of thought in language teaching. Such "large-scale" methods stand for a consensus in the profession and have become convenient labels for major phases in the development of language teaching: the grammar-translation method of the 19th century, the reform method in the late 19th and early 20th century, the audiolingual method dominant from the 1950s to the mid-1960s, and the communicative approach influential in various guises since the 1970s. Methods in this sense represent innovations which were inspired by new technologies, advances in the knowledge about language and learning, or by a redefinition of educational aims in answer to society's changing language needs. A subdivision of the history of language teaching according to labels like "the grammar translation method" should, however, be treated with some caution, because the development of methods, especially when actual classroom practice is considered, is a complex process (Howatt 1984; Klippel 1994 for the 19th century).

The knowledge base of methods derives from both academic disciplines and practical knowledge. Large-scale methods take some pride in their scientific foundations. Lado's best-selling monograph Language Teaching (1964) had as its subtitle: A Scientific Approach. The academic disciplines methods appeal to are linguistics, psychology and educational research with linguistics, at least until the 1970s, playing the leading role. In using linguistic knowledge, methods have often selected one aspect of language, which was, at the time, the focus of interest in linguistic description. The reform method made use of advances in phonetics and phonology. The audiolingual method modelled itself closely on structural linguistics and translated structural patterns identified in linguistic descriptions directly into so-called pattern practice (Hüllen 1971, 90-91). The communicative approach made use of categories taken from pragmatics (cf. section 2).

In contrast, "small-scale" methods tend to base themselves on the practical knowledge, beliefs, and philosophies of individual authors. This applies, for instance, to the wide range of methods which are marketed commercially and which offer a
combination of well-tried and not necessarily novel principles and procedures. Such small-scale methods typically focus on particular aspects of language learning (Stern 1983). The same is true for the so-called alternative methods of the 70s and 80s, which, through their sheer radicalism, attracted the attention of the discipline (cf. section 2).

In the light of this variable and heterogeneous knowledge base models have been developed which present a more systematic view of method (Anthony 1963; Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens 1964; Richards and Rodgers 2001; see also Stern 1983, chapter 21 for a summary of earlier attempts). Such models relate a theoretical side of methods to a practical or operational one. They do so by positing one or several intermediate layers of abstraction. A popular systematics by Richards and Rodgers (2001) (an elaboration of work by Anthony 1963) assumed, for instance, three levels of abstraction, i.e. the level of “approach,” accounting for theories of language and learning, that of “design” which encompasses objectives, materials, activities, participant roles etc., and that of “procedure” which refers to classroom interaction (Richards und Rodgers 2001, 28). A wide range of methods, both large-scale and small-scale ones, was described using this typology. However, doubts were raised as to whether Richards and Rodgers’ systematics has really succeeded in accommodating the heterogeneity of teaching methods (Pennycook 1989, 602).

The following discussion uses a very simple systematics and distinguishes between methods that focus on language (section 1) and methods that focus on language use (section 2). This distinction also represents a rough chronology since a focus on linguistic content and structure was a main concern of the 1950s and 1960s, whereas a focus on language use was the concern of methods developed during the 1970s and 1980s. Section 3 tries to present a contemporary and empirical view of methods by looking at teachers’ perceptions of methods and by looking at the ways in which methods are realized in classroom interaction.

1. Focus on Language

According to an early analysis of language teaching by Mackey (1965), a linguistic description is transformed into a teaching method in a series of steps. These are the selection of language to be taught, the gradation of this material, i.e. the grouping and ordering of it, the presentation of language and the repetition of what has been taught, i.e. the design of exercises. Mackey’s categories arose from issues and assumptions in language teaching prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s. They are still relevant for materials and course design and remain a helpful tool in the analysis of teaching methods that were developed later. This applies particularly to the gradation of language.

Methods create a sequence of steps that lead to an aim to be achieved in learning (Klippel 2000). The development of gradations for course books was one of the major achievements in the 19th century (Klippel 1994). Especially at a beginners’ level gradation is still considered an expert task usually undertaken by materials writers (Swan 2009), because linguistic structures represent a closely interlocking system and choices made at one point of this system trigger changes at another. Once the past tense has been introduced, it has to be ensured that this form is available in its regular and irregular form, together with the appropriate auxiliary forms for questions and
negative sentences etc. (Achtenhagen and Wienold 1975). This 'sequentiality' of language learning, i.e. the fact that the mastery of one feature presupposes the mastery of others, has been considered as a factor contributing to difficulties students encounter in instructed language learning (Sauer 1971, 1985). It also explains why language teaching is, like no other subject, dependent on course books.

The way language is sequenced in a course depends on options taken for presenting language. One fundamental option in presentation is whether or to what extent the L1 should be used as the metalanguage and medium of communication. There has been a wide consensus that the target language should be the sole medium of instruction. The "direct method" by its very name implied that the L1 should not intervene between meaning and linguistic expression. The reasons for excluding the L1 from language instruction were partly of a practical nature. Once English was increasingly taught to international and multilingual audiences, it was no longer possible for teachers to take learners' different first languages into consideration.

Using the target language as a medium of instruction means using a language that is only partly known to learners. In order to ensure comprehension, elaborate arrangements and procedures are needed for the introduction of new lexis and grammar. Grammatical rules can no longer simply be explained in the L1, rather they have to be taught "implicitly" by putting them into carefully arranged sequences that allow learners to proceed in minimal steps and, in this way, gradually infer the regularities of more complex grammatical structures.

The exclusive use of English in the classroom has been and still is the norm in teacher education (Swan 2009) and if methods can be said to be dogmatic and prescriptive this would particularly apply to the issue that English should be the sole medium of instruction. One notable attempt to challenge this orthodoxy was made in Germany by Butzkamm (1973; Butzkamm and Caldwell 2009). Significantly, the title of his widely discussed book Aufgeklärte Einsprachigkeit (Butzkamm 1973) called for "taking the dogma out of teaching methods" ("Zu einer Entdogmatisierung des Begriffs der Methode"). Butzkamm's alternative to "English only" was the so-called bilingual method (Butzkamm 1980) which suggested procedures that allowed the controlled and informed use of the L1 in language teaching.

The bilingual method presents both lexis and structures with the help of L1-equivalents. Refining and varying audiolingual techniques, it used the L1 as a stimulus to trigger learner production. Use of the L1 also made for greater flexibility with regard to gradation. It should be noted, however, that the bilingual method did not advocate the explicit teaching of grammar in the L1. Butzkamm's proposals to use the L1 as a resource for introducing lexis and structures did gain some influence although mainstream opinion took a long time to become less dogmatic on this issue. One change in this direction was the inclusion into today's syllabuses of bilingual skills like interpreting and mediating.

Options taken with regard to gradation and presentation are guided by the theory of learning a teaching method subscribes to. The direct method, for instance, assumed that a presentational mode that banned the use of the L1 would enable learners to form a direct association between the meaning and form of a foreign language expression. The audiolingual method combined a step by step presentation of grammar patterns with a behaviourist theory of learning and tried to habitualise discrete structural features of the language through stimulus-response exercises.
Options for presentation and the theories of learning associated with them became the focus of debate, when, by the early sixties (Rivers 1964), the tenets of the audiolingual method – a view of language as structure and a behaviorist perspective on learning – were challenged and in the end discarded in the wake of the so-called "cognitive turn." The question, as it was put at the time, of whether language was better learnt through habit formation or through cognition gave rise to a number of large-scale experimental method comparisons (Chastain and Woerdehoff 1968; Scherer and Wertheimer 1964; von Elek and Oskarsson 1973). Arguably these were comparisons of different options for presentation. A so-called "implicit" method followed the maxims of the audiolingual method and presented grammar inductively whereas an explicit method allowed the use of the L1 and devoted some time to explanations and translation which were assumed to be more conducive to cognitive learning processes (von Elek and Oskarsson 1973, 130-131; Levin 1972; Appel 2009). Although there were some indications of a superiority of the explicit method (von Elek and Oskarsson 1973, 198), large-scale method comparisons were, on the whole, not conclusive (for critical review cf. Clark 1969).

2. Focus on Language Use

After the demise of the audiolingual method and its theoretical assumptions, there was, for the time being, no large-scale method to take over. It was not until the early 1970s that, with the emergence of the so-called communicative approach, another major method started to establish itself.

The communicative approach turned to other aspects of method than gradation and presentation and made a reformulation of aims in language teaching its major focus. Using concepts from pragmatics and a number of ad-hoc categories it formulated a so-called notional syllabus that no longer identified structures as aims in language teaching but the different purposes learners could use language for. The overarching concept that was to capture such aims in language teaching was the notion of "communicative competence" which soon became influential and has been expanded to include aspects of intercultural learning (Byram 1997).

In Germany, advocacy for the communicative approach had not least developed out of a growing dissatisfaction with the audiolingual method, which – so the allegation – had reduced language to structure sacrificing authenticity to the rigour of structural grading. By the 1970s influential textbook authors saw the need for an early exposure of learners to authentic language (Alexander 1976) which did not necessarily fit into sequences that moved from simple to complex language in a step-by-step fashion. The question of gradation, however, still remained an issue. Solutions like a gradation according to situations turned out to be impracticable. Most of today's course books, all of which subscribe to communicative principles, are graded according to structural criteria. One way of reconciling the linguistic difficulty of authentic texts to learners' still limited command of the target language was a gradation of tasks. Here learners are helped in coping with authentic language through activities and exercises which are easy enough to master and which give learners the necessary support (cf. for a systematics of such tasks Lynch 1996, 94). Similar principles underlie the so-called "task-based approach" to language teaching that is currently advocated (Ellis 2003).
It was indeed in the area of tasks and exercises where the communicative approach made its second, lasting contribution to language teaching methodology. This contribution consisted in a rich repertoire of activities designed to make learners process, express, share and evaluate – mostly factual – information (e.g. Klippel 1984; Littlewood 1981). This development was taken one step further by the so-called humanistic exercises, which make personal experience, perceptions, and feelings the contents of language classes. A wide variety of creative and theatrical activities, some inspired by techniques used in humanistic psychology, invited learners to express such information (Hadfield 1992; Maley 2005; Moskowitz 1978; Rinvolucri 1984). Humanistic exercises practiced rather than taught linguistic forms, i.e. they presupposed that learners already possessed the necessary linguistic knowledge and left it open where such knowledge would come from. Some exercises in this tradition (especially Moskowitz 1978) were criticised for being intrusive rather than learner-centred (Legutke and Thomas 1991).

While the communicative approach was establishing itself as a large-scale method, a somewhat surprising parallel development took place which led to a renaissance of the concept of method. The so-called alternative or fringe methods are examples of small-scale methods. They strongly emphasize particular teacher and learner roles. The "Total Physical Response Method" (Asher 1969), where learners silently follow the teacher's instructions, makes the listener role its principal feature. The "Silent Way" restricts the teacher's role to giving learners non-verbal clues (usually in the form of carefully prepared visual material) and thus enables them to work out forms of the foreign language themselves (Gattegno 1972). "Community Language Learning" gives learners complete control of the contents they want to express in the foreign language with the teacher in the role of a provider of language (Curran 1972).

Alternative methods offered, above all, well-defined procedures in the classroom and therefore met the expectation that a method should tell teachers what to do. Such procedures could be attributed to different belief systems as the history of the Total Physical Response Method shows. The procedures suggested by this method were attributed to rather different theoretical assumptions in the course of time. Originally created in the audiolingual age with strong behaviourist elements in the 1960s, TPR became an alternative method in the 1980s because of its holistic elements and made a comeback in the teaching of English for Young Learners as the so-called "comprehension method" (Verstehensmethode), which derived its rationale from assumptions in second language acquisition research like, for instance, Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis.

The renaissance of the concept of method during the 1980s was not least owed to the work of Earl Stevick (1976; 1980; 1990; 1996; 1998), who provided a common conceptual umbrella for the alternative methods. Stevick argued that the success of a method depends not so much on its internal logic or on the treatment of linguistic content but rather on the personal dynamics at work in the here and now of the classroom (Stevick 1996, 193). These dynamics are driven by learners' needs, for instance by a need for security or by a need for self-realization. Although Stevick's psychosocial interpretation of language teaching methods was widely received it could do little to alter the fact that, by the 1990s, the concept of method had fallen into disrepute.

There were essentially two factors contributing to this. One was the advent of second language acquisition research, which had grown out of the cognitive
reorientation in the 1960s. Second language acquisition research started out from an analysis of learners' errors and gradually developed into a theory and description of the learner's so-called interlanguage (Corder 1967; Selinker 1994). Its essential tenet was that second language acquisition takes place in a so-called natural order that cannot be influenced by instruction. Krashen's (e.g. 1976) work, which was widely popularized, made a distinction between learning and acquisition, the first being a conscious process leading to a certain control of rules, the second being an unconscious developmental process. Since only acquisition was assumed to lead to an active mastery of the language and since acquisition was also considered immune to conscious learning, language teaching in general was left with a very limited role. A somewhat more moderate stance is taken in Pienemann's (1998) work, which still assumes similar mechanisms as Krashen, but which also acknowledges the potential of teaching if it sets in at the right stage of a learner's developmental trajectory. Similar assumptions are made in research on focus on form (Norris and Ortega 2000). The assumption of a dichotomy between learning and acquisition was roughly in line with the communicative approach and related methods, which could be seen as providing contexts for acquisition. On the whole, however, methods increasingly met with scepticism. This trend was reinforced by a second development, the so-called "post-method condition" (e.g. Kumaravadivelu 2006).

Somewhat overstating his case, Kumaravadivelu claimed that methods were too often centrally prescribed and hence not appropriate for the teaching situations in which they were meant to be applied. This was perceived to apply particularly to the export of "Western" methodology to non-Western contexts (Holliday 1994; Ellis 1996). Articles entitled "There is no Best Method, Why?" (Prabhu 1990) or "The Concept of Method, Interested Knowledge, and the Politics of Language Teaching" (Pennycook 1989) generally argued for an empowerment of the teacher and therefore prepared the ground for research into teachers' thoughts and actions.

3. Methods in the Classroom

Methods not only exist as academic knowledge and ideologies. They also exist as personal knowledge and practice. Such knowledge is shaped by personal experience and by structural constraints on teachers' work (Appel 2000). Methods are personal, because they are connected to the beliefs and routines a teacher develops in the course of his or her professional development. They form an essential part of the teaching persona, comprising implicit assumptions about learning and teaching which often have autobiographical sources and affect teaching behaviour. Teachers' beliefs influence whether and how a method is implemented. It could be shown for the communicative approach (Sato and Kleinsasser 1999) that personal interpretations of methods may differ considerably from the original assumptions and intentions of that method. Far from being victims of dogma, teachers have, before and after any post-method condition, exercised their own judgment (Bell 2007).

Teachers' beliefs and experiential knowledge have therefore sparked considerable research interest (cf. Appel 2000; Borg 2003; Tsui 2003; Woods 1996 for reviews). Such knowledge will incorporate a teaching method if it is in line with biographical knowledge and, probably most importantly, if it addresses the demands of the teaching situation. Such demands include working with heterogeneous groups as well as the need to motivate students to participate in classroom interaction and to hold their
attention (Doyle 1979; Clark and Peterson 1986, 258; Bromme 1992, 64; Appel 2000). Methods are important tools for coping with these demands because they specify different types of participation and in this way help to regulate classroom interaction.

Language teaching interaction differs in several respects from natural conversation because it is oriented towards the institutional aim of teaching the language and because the object of instruction is also its medium (Schwab 2009). Teaching interaction is characterized by its academic task structure and by its social participation structure (Erickson 1982; Johnson 1995; Appel 2010). In section 1 gradation and presentation were discussed as options on the macro-level of course and material design. The academic task structure of a lesson represents such options on the micro-level of lessons or of episodes within lessons. It specifies the series of logical steps leading to the mastery of a complex subject matter. The social participation structure of a lesson regulates interactive rights and the roles participants can take (Erickson 1982, 154). These roles are similar to the participant roles described by Goffman (1981) which involve acting in the capacity of someone who controls the contents of what is said (principal), someone who controls the wording of what is said (author) or someone who simply lends his or her voice to a predetermined text (animator). Such roles are important features of teaching methods, where, on the one hand, audiolingual drills cast learners in the role of animators and where, on the other, humanistic exercises predominantly see them as principals.

Social participation structure and academic task structure interact in a dynamic way. It takes considerable skill to fine-tune them according to the needs of a class and individual learners. There is added complexity because in monolingually taught classes the teacher cannot resort to the first language as a metalanguage and therefore has to use numerous non-verbal resources like prosody and paralinguistic features in order to communicate about the language to be learnt using that same language (Appel 2007, 2010).

All this shows that the concerns of teaching methods that were described earlier as codified knowledge and ideologies have their correlates in what teachers actually do in classroom interaction. This can also be said for the two different focuses discussed in sections 1 and 2, i.e. a focus on language and a focus on language use. The audiolingual method, for instance, made a focus on language, i.e. on linguistic accuracy and the avoidance of mistakes, its key concern whereas the communicative approach focussed on language use, i.e. on the communication of contents, and therefore showed a greater tolerance towards mistakes. This dichotomy is mirrored in actual classroom interaction, as research done in a conversation analysis framework has shown (Seedhouse 2004). Such research has identified so-called form-and-accuracy contexts and meaning-and-fluency contexts. Teachers act differently in either context, especially with regard to feedback on errors. In a form-and-accuracy context the forms envisaged by the teacher will be insisted on, whereas in so-called meaning-and-fluency contexts the focus will be on the contents of what students say and tolerance towards errors of language form will be greater.

The fundamental difference between methods as codified knowledge and methods as actual teacher behaviour is that in classroom interaction decisions for either focus are made in a highly pragmatic and context-sensitive way and that one and the same teacher might opt for accuracy in one context and for fluency in another. The beliefs,
ideologies and the knowledge methods embrace are realized in classroom practice in the form of options (Stevick 1986) taken in answer to the demands of the teaching situation. Addressing these demands successfully has long been considered a core competence in language teaching (O’Neill 1991).

4. Conclusion

One of the current orthodoxies in language teaching is a strong belief in immersion classrooms as an environment conducive to "natural" learning, i.e. the kind of learning that has predominantly been described in SLA studies. This kind of belief puts a lot of hope in teaching language through content and communicative tasks. A similar reliance on immersion rules the scene in English for Young Learners. However, approaches focussing on communication can only become effective if the language to be used is at least to some degree known to the learner. Making it available remains one of the central tasks of language teaching. Methods have offered solutions both to teaching the language and its use and care should be taken that the wealth of ideas, options, and philosophies contained in methods is not lost, because teachers need a coherent knowledge and a rich repertoire of methods.

Works Cited


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