

IN LANGUAGE TEACHING, WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT: LANGUAGE OR TEACHING?

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Linguistics – including applied linguistics – is said to be the parent academic discipline of TEFL (see, for example, Johnson, 1986, Brown, 1989): it deals not only with the subject-matter of our teaching – pronunciation, grammar, semantics, discourse structure and so on – but also with aspects of language learning and use. Pedagogy, on the other hand, is about the nature of effective classroom teaching (not necessarily EFL): what kinds of things children perceive, understand, remember better, and under what circumstances; what the teacher can do to motivate learning; classroom management and control; teacher-student relationships; and so on.

Both the study of language (linguistics) and that of teaching (pedagogy) are obviously essential to the teacher of English as a foreign language. But if both are essential, why should we concern ourselves with the question of which of them is more important?

The answer is, I think that in professional practice there is often an apparent conflict between the two which is not so easily resolved and which forces the teacher – whether she is aware of it or not – to make decisions about which has the priority.

An example. Supposing I am designing a first-year syllabus for ten-year olds learning English as a foreign language. Frequency studies might indicate that words like crocodile, elephant, and butterfly are far less commonly used than words like engine, wheel, seat, (West, 1953). If we design our syllabus according to linguistic considerations, we will naturally prefer to teach the more common words earlier. But crocodile etc. appeal to children both because of their meaning and because they are fun to (try to) say: and a reliable pedagogical principle is that children tend to learn more easily, words that appeal to them. As a teacher, I am interested in my students' motivation and rapid acquisition of new vocabulary which they can use to say things, as much as in the usefulness of that vocabulary. So I may well prioritize the less common words.

Another example from methodology this time. There is some fairly convincing evidence (described in Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982) that shows that children learning a second language in natural 'immersion' conditions have a long 'silent period' before they start to speak. Applying this in the classroom, one would need to spend the first few weeks, at least, doing all the talking oneself, or not necessarily demanding verbal response from the students. But classroom teaching cannot afford the luxury of 'immersion' conditions. We have four lessons a week instead of the learner's entire interaction time, and we cannot wait for natural processes: we have to speed things up by getting the learners to speak as soon as they can. Also, active performance by the learners allows us to give encouraging feedback, which reinforces learning and raises motivation and self-image – again, pedagogical principles.

In these examples, I have made it fairly clear that I would prioritize the pedagogical argument, and why. Here is a third example, where I would not. Frequency studies again. It has been shown that the present progressive tense is far less frequent than the present simple (Duskanova and Urbanova, 1967; or you can test this out for yourself by taking a random selection of written and spoken texts and counting!). But the present progressive is far more 'teachable': its structure does not entail the difficult do/does interrogative and negative forms, and its meaning can be easily demonstrated in the classroom and lends itself to interesting mime – and picture-based practice. The temptation is to teach the present progressive first, and to spend more time on it – a temptation, I think, which should be resisted.

In other words, when deciding what to teach and how to put it across, I have to consider both linguistic and pedagogical arguments, and then decide which has the priority, or how to combine them. In deciding, I need to use all the knowledge I have gained about TEFL through courses, experience, reading, discussion and reflection.

Teachers who have been through TEFL or Applied Linguistics courses as a preparation for their job may often find that they have been taught to rely mainly on linguistics as a basis for teaching. Most of their theoretical courses and reading will have been on linguistic subjects; relatively little on pedagogy or education as such. The section of the course devoted to teaching experience cannot help but relate to pedagogy – but usually on a strictly practical level: classroom techniques and teaching behaviour. So that trainees come out with a lot of theoretical linguistic knowledge, but little idea how to integrate it with practical classroom pedagogy; for example, they may know a lot about the phonology of English, but have no idea about how to teach pronunciation. On the other hand they may have some good teaching ideas, but little awareness of relevant principles of pedagogy or how the linguistics can be best utilized within them. For instance, they may have been taught that group work is desirable; but may have failed to learn to distinguish between situations where group work is pedagogically valid and where it is not; or may have no awareness of the role of group or pair work in the development of communication strategies.

And you see the results in the classroom. Trained EFL teachers may try uneasily at first to apply some of the (applied) linguistics research-based knowledge in the classroom, but most swiftly abandon it, and base their teaching on techniques they learned through practice or observation. Thus a lot of teaching is opportunistic and unprincipled ('that procedure works so I'll use it, never mind the theory'). This is unfortunately often reflected in the literature; you get on one hand, articles giving 'practical tips' with no reasoned rationale accompanying them, or on the other, descriptions of research-based or purely speculative theory, with only very dubious links with professional action.

So what do I want?

First, I wish training courses would devote more time to discussing the principles of good pedagogy – we need more courses on things like 'classroom climate and motivation', 'lesson design', 'activity design', 'classroom management'. And it wouldn't hurt to look seriously at the teaching/learning methods of other subjects: science, history, art.

Secondly, I wish there were more integration of theory with practice. Theoretical coursework has its place in the learning of the principles of both pedagogy and linguistics – but these principles spring from and ultimately express themselves in human action, so this, surely, is how they should be learned. The principles of student-teacher relationships or of classroom discourse for example: these manifest themselves through real-time classroom interaction, and should be learned primarily, I think, by critical reflection and analysis of how trainees interacted with students in their practice teaching, or how their own teachers interacted with them – these reflections, of course, filled out and enriched by insights gained from books or lectures. One obvious implication of this model is that practice teaching becomes an essential part of a methodology course, rather than a separate component; recent classroom events (such as teacher-student exchanges) are discussed (in methodology sessions) and conclusions slotted into an overall conceptual framework of how language teaching/learning 'works'.

Third, I wish there were more integration of linguistics and pedagogy. A methodology course should teach professional know-how based on both linguistics and pedagogical information. Such a course might be called (as the president of IATEFL, at the time of writing this article, Denis Girard, suggested years ago). The ultimate aim of such a course would be to get trainees to develop a rationale of language teaching, which enables them to make informed and principled choices between the conflicting claims of different theories.

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