

A “Practical Theory” of Foreign Language Teaching

Julian Bamford

This paper deals with the relationship between theory and practice in foreign language teaching. Most specialists believe that teachers should base their methodology upon a theory of language and how it is learned. Teachers, on the other hand, only find theory relevant when it arises from practice. It has been stated that, for teachers to belong to a professional community, they must share their personal pedagogic theories. To this end, a practice-related theory of language and language learning is articulated.

SLA, Applied Linguistics, and Language Teaching

The purpose of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research is to describe and explain how second languages are learned. More specifically, it is concerned with who is to learn, what is learned and how the learning takes place (Long & Richards, 1989, p. viii). This endeavor can be approached from linguistic, sociological, psychological, neurological or educational perspectives (Gass & Schachter, p. 1). SLA is an interdisciplinary but autonomous academic field (Long & Richards, 1989, p. viii) that has more in common with the concerns of first language acquisition research than with those of language pedagogy (Gass & Schachter, pp. 3, 4). At the same time, language teachers do look to SLA and it is for this reason that bodies concerned with foreign language teaching (FLT) education provide funding for SLA research (Ellis, 1985, p. 284). It is understood that, “although SLA research can offer neither formulae nor recipes for FLT—it ‘does have much to contribute to teaching practice in the long run.’” (Vogel & Bahns, 1989, p. 184, quoting Lightbown, 1985, p. 175).

The relationship of theory and practice in foreign language teaching is much discussed (e.g. van Lier, 1991), particularly with reference to teacher training (e.g. Brumfit, 1979; Taylor, 1985; Richards & Crookes, 1988). Teacher trainees often complain that their courses are too theoretical and not practical enough. More specifically, they are complaining that much of the theory they are being taught seems irrelevant to the practice of teaching. This problem usually arises when foreign language teacher preparation is conducted in the context of academic disciplines such as linguistics, SLA or Applied Linguistics. Theorizing in these fields is usually conducted for academic, not practical ends (van Lier, 1991, p. 29).

Personal Theory Building

Ellis (1985, p. 2) observes that “all teachers have a theory of language learning” on which they base their teaching, but it may be covert and unexamined. He feels that “teachers will be better off with an explicit set of ideas about language learning” (p. 2) so that they may critically examine their principles as a basis for possibly modifying and improving their teaching. Similarly, Brown (1987) contends that teachers need a “comprehensive, integrated understanding of the teaching-learning process, such that (they) will be able to construct a personalized rationale, or theory, of second language acquisition” (p. xii). Richards and Rogers (1986) also show that behind all methods there are more or less well-thought-out theories both of language and of language learning, the former being “a model of language competence and an account of the basic features of linguistic organization and language use” and the latter “an account of the central processes of learning and an account of the conditions believed to promote successful language learning” (p. 19).

But which comes first, theory or practice? Brown holds that “the best teacher... devises classroom methods and techniques that *derive from* a comprehensive knowledge of the total process of language learning” (1987, p. 218, emphasis added). Ellis cautions however that “arguably our state of knowledge is insufficient to warrant firm pedagogical applications” (1985, p. 3).

What most specialists in SLA and Applied Linguistics do not realize is that theory can only seem of relevance to teachers when it is “seen to arise out of practice” (Taylor, p. 37). With this in mind, Prabhu (1990) introduces a different analysis of the relationship between theory and practice in teaching. He observes that “teachers need to operate with some personal conceptualisation of how their teaching leads to desired learning” (p. 172), calling this the teacher’s “sense of plausibility.” This personal theory must be *based on* practice, for it will only be plausible if it has arisen from practical experiences of success and failure in the classroom.

This is the context in which academic SLA theory is indispensable to classroom practice. On the most basic level, SLA theory provides the concepts and terms necessary for both understanding what happens in the classroom, and for the articulating of a personal theory. SLA theory can also suggest reasons why certain classroom practices work and don’t work. Conversely, it is only practical experience which allows a teacher to judge which elements of SLA theory are of practical, rather than purely academic relevance.

Sharing a Personal Theory

Bamford (1989) and Prabhu (1990) call for “an articulation and discussion among teachers of one another’s pedagogic perceptions” (Prabhu, p. 174). Such a process of sharing among teachers redefines teacher training as an interactive and a career-long pro-

cess. In Prabhu's view, this is a necessary part of belonging to a professional community, for a teacher's "sense of plausibility" is kept alive by the act of teaching, and by "interaction between different senses of plausibility" (p. 174). To date, few teachers have set down and shared their personal "practical theories" of language teaching (for a rare exception, see Bamford, 1989). The rest of this paper articulates the author's current understanding of aspects of language and language learning based on pedagogic perceptions. Each element of theory is linked to its pedagogic implications.

A Theory of Language

Language is how we represent the world (Sperber and Wilson quoted in Gregg, 1989, p. 27), and we use it for communicative and integrative purposes. Language embodies culture (Gee, 1988). It can be analyzed in terms of syntax, semantics, function, lexis, phonology, discourse and in other ways. Many of the subtler elements have not been codified, however, and certain rules, for example, of discourse, can only be expressed at much greater length than the language they describe (for an example, see Gee, 1988, pp. 209-211). While the linguistic elements that convey basic referential meaning (Gee, p. 203) have largely been described, the elements that mark one as a member of a language/culture group (and of sub-groups within it) have not.

A pedagogic implication of the above view of language is that although descriptions and rules of language can be introduced in the classroom (e.g. grammar rules, lexical meanings and functional patterns), a rich enough language environment must also be provided either in or out of the classroom so that the student encounters those elements of language that have yet to be described, or are beyond efficient description (c.f. Griffiee, 1993).

A Theory of Language Learning

Child first language and adult second language acquisition Children, being developmentally less mature, learn more slowly than adults. At the same time, for all children, language is a vehicle for conceptualizing their experience. Language also has communicative and integrative utility. These are incentives powerful enough to ensure that all children normally learn one or more first languages. While all three incentives can also apply to adult second language learners, they rarely exert anything like the same importance. Adults already have both a representational system and an identity "inextricably bound up with (the first) language" (Brown, 1987, p. 50). This may explain the high failure rate, different motivations, and the prevalence of fossilization among adult second language learners.

In pedagogic terms, adults, being developmentally mature, can almost always benefit from classroom instruction. Long (1988) views focus on form as the key feature of

instruction “because of the saliency it brings to targeted features in classroom input, and also in input outside the classroom, where this available” (p. 136).

Characteristics of the human mind There are two characteristics of the mind which have far-reaching consequences in language learning. The first is that we only notice things that we are significant to us. The second is that the more we experience something, the less impression it makes on us. There is an important corollary to this: the more we experience or do something, the more automatically we come to perform it with less and less conscious attention.

As we only notice things that are significant to us, we must strive to keep learners interested at all times, and make what we do in the classroom seem relevant to the students’ goals. And because the more we experience something, the less impression it makes, we must periodically change what we do and how we do it in the classroom. Even the best materials and techniques only retain their effectiveness for a certain time.

Automatization and acquisition When learning a language, we come to associate certain combinations of sounds (or symbols) with phenomena we experience. Because the more we experience or do something, the more automatically we perform it with less and less conscious attention, these sound/meaning associations become gradually automatized. Once automatic, “language is a means of thinking, of representing the world to oneself.” (Brown (paraphrasing Gouin), 1987, p. 35).

Items of language (e.g. a grammatical form; a word; a sound pattern) are usually acquired and automatized gradually. They are also learned with different degrees of accuracy, and it usually takes time for learners to refine their understanding of a language item toward that shared by native speakers of the language. Finally, items are not acquired discreetly, but retained in combination with things already learned, making nexuses of knowledge. The richer the associations that new material has with things already learned, the easier it is to retain. Related to this is the fact that the more language we acquire, the easier it is to acquire further language. Another result of the associative nature of learning is that when learners first acquire a new item of language, they can usually recall the context and circumstances in which it was learned.

The fact that the more we experience or do something, the more automatically we perform it with less and less conscious attention takes us to the heart of language pedagogy. The goal of instruction is this automaticity, which is equivalent to fluency. This means that the building blocks of language, such as grammar, functions and vocabulary, must be introduced and practiced in ways that keep students interested and make them feel that what they are doing will help them achieve their goals. If the language is constantly recycled and recombined, it will be acquired through the process of practicing and using it, as long as that practice seems important (i.e. interesting or useful) to the learner. McLaughlin (1988, quoted in O’Malley and Chamot, 1990) puts it this way: learning a second language involves “a process whereby controlled, attention-demanding operations become automatic through practice” and “an increasing number of information

chunks are compiled into an automatic procedure" (p. 148).

While audiolingual drills fulfil the requirements of focus and repeated practice, they don't usually work very well. This is because they usually don't interest us, and we soon turn off our conscious attention in the face of repetition.

Because language items are retained in combination with other items, we should encourage learners to see connections wherever possible. Connections can be made in terms of such things as meaning, collocation, orthography or learning context. The associative nature of learning also suggests that the language learning environment and activities be as rich, human and realistic as possible.

Goals, motivation and reasons for learning Unlike children, adults may differ from each other in their reasons for learning a language. Their motivation is usually some combination of Gardner and Lambert's integrative and instrumental types. We only pay attention to things that are significant to us, and it is our motivation to learn a language that lowers the significance threshold: a keen learner will find relevance in almost any learning activity. This explains the crucial role that motivation plays in language acquisition. Something else too rarely stated is that motivation is killed when the learner feels a failure to the extent that the task of learning a second language begins to seem impossible.

Human nature is again of significance here. Many times, we just don't feel like doing the study we know we need to do to reach our goals and, as a result, we don't study. We are also often poor planners, and we let our intentions to study a language get lost among the other activities in our life. Our initial enthusiasm also tends to evaporate as we encounter blocks. We may also have unrealistic goals or expectations, for example, proficiency in the foreign language within a year or two by studying once a week, doing little homework and missing some classes, or significant progress through study with a native speaking teacher.

Teachers should be aware of why their students want to learn and tailor the learning program accordingly. Learner motivation must also be encouraged by having students succeed whenever possible in what they are doing.

There are also motivation-enhancing elements connected to classroom study and enrollment in a course of instruction. Entering a language program is a way of formalizing one's commitment to studying the language, and being expected to go to class and do homework can keep you engaged in studying when you would be likely not to do so if left to your own devices. Thus, requiring students to commit themselves in advance, for example, financially, is a way to ensure that the original commitment is not lost. In class, the interpersonal relationships and shared goals with other students can also increase motivation and interest in study above levels found in one-to-one instruction or when studying on one's own.

We should help our students translate their enthusiasm into realistic expectations and goals. Regarding the length of time necessary to learn a second language, based on

estimates made by the Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. Department of State (Diller, 1978, p. 134), and other sources, I estimate that it takes between one and two years of full-time quality instruction for motivated false-beginners to achieve a high level of fluency in English (TOEFL 600+), depending on their first language (see Bamford, 1987).

Representational and integrative aspects of language While the representational level of language and its basic communicative function are open to conscious practice and learning, the integrative level seems to be largely impervious to conscious intervention. Acquisition of these deeper aspects of language appears to depend on the learner's integrative orientation toward the target language/culture.

As the integrative aspects of language are hard to isolate for instruction and seem largely impervious to conscious learning, a rich learning environment is called for in and out of the classroom to allow for their natural acquisition. Pronunciation is an example of this. Certain tricks such as tongue placement and voicing can be quickly and usefully taught, but, in the main, accurate pronunciation seems an ability that students acquire naturally or do not acquire according to their degree of integrative motivation with the target culture. The same phenomenon can be observed with grammar: learners who are not integratively motivated tend to be oblivious to forms that are not essential to communication. They don't use these forms and don't seem to notice them in the input. You could say that the forms are not salient because they are not significant to such learners.

Strategies, styles and personality variables Cognitive and affective variables in learners are "elusive" (Brown, 1987, p. 100) and overwhelming in their complexity and interrelatedness. But we should at least note that different people seem to learn in different ways: holistic versus analytical, or inductive versus deductive, for example. Teachers also tend to teach according to their own learning style.

Learners have different learning styles, but these personality and cognitive variables are too many to take into account when planning an instructional program. Teachers can, however, try to provide as many different types of learning experience as possible. Listening to students talking about what helps them learn, or having students make suggestions for changes in classroom procedure can provide the necessary information. Language classes can expose students to strategies, materials and activities that they would not use if studying alone, and can thus make learning more interesting and effective.

Conclusion

A language learning environment should be rich and real. It must include language in all its complexity and involve the learner as much as possible, both cognitively and affectively. That could, of course, be a description of life. Stated in another way then, the language classroom should be as lifelike as possible. Yet learners must feel they are

succeeding. Therein lies the challenge to both teachers and learners: How to make language learning both authentic and "do-able."

References

- Bamford, J. (1987). How much in how long? Estimating the length of time it takes to learn a foreign language. Information and Communications Study, 8, 143-149. (Chigasaki: Bunkyo University).
- Bamford, J. (1989). The how and the how long of English language teaching in Japan: A teacher's perspective. Information and Communications Study, 10, 139-149. (Chigasaki: Bunkyo University).
- Brown, H. D. (1987). Principles of language learning and teaching (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Brumfit, C. J. (1979). Integrating theory and practice. In S. Holden (Ed.), Teacher training (pp. 1-8). London: Modern English Publications.
- Diller, K. C. (1978). The Language Teaching Controversy. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Ellis, R. (1985). Understanding second language acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1972). Attitudes and motivation in second-language learning. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Gass, S. M., & Schachter, J. (Eds.). (1989). Linguistic perspectives on second language acquisition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gee, J. P. (1988). Dracula, the Vampire Lestat, and TESOL. TESOL Quarterly, 22, 201-225.
- Gregg, K. R. (1989). Second language acquisition theory: The case for a generative perspective. In S. M. Gass & J. Schachter (Eds.), Linguistic perspectives on second language acquisition (pp. 15-40). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Griffee, D. T. (1993). Textbook vs. authentic dialogues: What's the difference? The Language Teacher, 17 (10), 25-31.
- Lightbown, P. M. (1985). Great expectations: Second language acquisition research and classroom teaching. Applied Linguistics, 6, 173-189.
- Long, M. H. (1988). Instructed Interlanguage Development. In L. M. Beebe (Ed.), Issues in second language acquisition: Multiple perspectives (pp. 115-141). New York: Newbury House/Harper & Row.
- Long, M. H., & Richards, J. C. (1989). Series editors' preface. In S. M. Gass & J. Schachter (Eds.), Linguistic perspectives on second language acquisition (p. viii). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McLaughlin, B. (1988). Restructuring. Paper presented at the Second Language Research Forum, Honolulu, Hawaii, March 1988.

- O'Malley, J. M., & Chamot, A. U. (1990). Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Prabhu, N. S. (1990). There is no best method—why? TESOL Quarterly, 24, 161-176.
- Richards, J. C., & Crookes, G. (1988). The practicum in TESOL. TESOL Quarterly, 22, 9-27.
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (1986). Approaches and methods in language teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1986). Relevance: Communication and cognition. London: Blackwell.
- Taylor, D. S. (1985). The place of methodology in the training of language teachers and the integration of theory and practice. System, 13, 37-41.
- van Lier, L. (1991). Inside the classroom: Learning processes and teaching procedures. Applied Language Learning, 2, 29-68.
- Vogel, T., & Bahns, J. (1989). Introducing the English progressive in the classroom: Insights from second language acquisition research. System, 17, 183-193.