

METHODS OR MATERIALS AND MANAGEMENT - Where should our focus be?

Graham Thurgood

California State University, Fresno.

ABSTRACT

The quest for ways to improve language teaching is eternal. The question is how? For several generations, research and training has been focused on the theoretical component, that is, methods. This paper sets out to show that this preoccupation with methods is misguided. The key to improving language teaching lies in the practical component of teacher training courses. In other words, the focus should be on materials and management, that is, on activities.

An Overview

Effective language teaching is a crucial part of development, a crucial part of business, a crucial part of having access to the modern world. Yet, despite its obvious importance and despite the enormous amount of research that has gone into it, the feeling that it could be done better is widely shared. Researchers, teachers, and learners all seem to have a sense that there is a better way.

The quest is for ways to improve language teaching - the question is how? Certainly, as we are often told, language learning is a complex and subtle process; certainly, countless factors influence what goes on during the process; and, certainly, an enormous amount of individual and group variation exists. Many of us recognize this complexity and do not expect a single, revolutionary answer. Many of us would be quite pleased with partial answers a better understanding of the complex whole.

Nonetheless, isn't it surprising that we seem at times to have made so little progress? After so much effort, why do we still seem to have so few answers? Perhaps part of our problem has been in where we have been looking for answers - in where our research efforts and in where our training efforts have been focussed. Perhaps we have wasted the bulk of our efforts looking in the wrong place.

For several generations much of our research and training was focused on methods - a global approach largely concerned with general principles. More "mundane" concerns with materials writing, with the structuring of activities, and with classroom management techniques have been assigned second class status - and, treated as if they are only of minor importance in the larger picture. And, thus, we have looked to methods for our answers.

The problem with methods

However, it is becoming increasingly apparent that this preoccupation with methods is misguided. In the mid-1970s, Earl Stevick (1976:104-105) wrote warning us about the logical problems inherent in describing language teaching in terms of methods. As Stevick pointed out, methods could not be a fully adequate way of describing what went on in the classroom, since not only could different teachers using the same method get different results, but different teachers using different methods could get the same results. In both cases, more than just knowledge of which method was being used is needed to understand what is going on.

Hard experimental research on methods was conducted in the 1960s and the early 1970s. Various researchers did a number of large-scale comparative studies of what were then the best-known methods (Scherer and Wertheimer, 1964; Smith, 1970) and of inductive and deductive methods (von Elek and Oskarsson, 1975; Seliger, 1975).

The results of these large-scale comparative studies were convincingly and strikingly inconclusive. Of course, there were some differences: students taught through grammar-translation techniques, not surprisingly, did better at translation tasks; students taught through audio-lingual techniques frequently showed slight advantages in speaking, and so on. However, by and large, the comparative studies never resulted in any definite conclusions - except, of course, that the comparison of methods was not going to provide any useful answers.

And since then there has been a growing body of data and a growing consensus of opinion that knowledge of methods does not transfer to the classroom teaching in any meaningful way. Rather than being real, methods seem on close inspection to be a largely hypothetical construct with little direct connection to the classroom.

Method is inadequate as a basic unit for second language acquisition research, inadequate as a basic unit for the description of classroom learning, and inadequate as a primary unit for teaching training. In short, it is not a particularly promising place to look for our answers.

The shift of focus to the classroom

Although many teacher trainers and teachers still look at methods for guidance, the vast majority of serious contemporary researchers have abandoned the method as the focus of their attention. Instead the focus has shifted to the classroom, and within the last ten or fifteen years, the interest in classroom research has steadily grown. As Allwright and Bailey, (1991: xviii), write "in order to help our learners learn, it is not 'the latest method' that we need, but rather a fuller understanding of the classroom and what goes on there."

Nonetheless the upsurge in classroom research, although it has provided "fuller understanding of the classroom and what goes on there" has not resulted in an obvious improvement in classroom teaching.

Our question, of course, is what is the problem? Is it because we are still looking in the wrong places? Or, is it that, like the method, the classroom is the wrong unit for our research?

The unit of classroom focus: activities

The answer seems to be that, with the shift of focus to the classroom, we are now looking in the right place - after all, it is in the classroom that, by and large, teaching and learning take place. So, we have come at least part way - we are now looking in the right place. And, not only are we looking in the right place, but we are finding out things about the principles involved in learning and, in teaching.

Nonetheless, even when teachers have been taught about these principles, the bulk of this knowledge is still not being incorporated into our classroom teaching. To be any more than theoretical noise, our knowledge about learning and teaching needs to be even more directly related to what happens in the classroom.

So why haven't teachers incorporated these principles into their teaching practice? In the vast majority of cases, it certainly isn't a lack of good will. It isn't laziness. It isn't ignorance. I have taught far too many teachers and given far too many workshops to believe any of these things is the problem. No, the problem lies elsewhere.

The problem is that, while, as Long (1989: 2) points out "...teachers of languages and other school subjects plan, conduct and recall their lessons, not in terms of methods, but rather as sequences of instructional activities;" researchers, in contrast, do not see the classroom in terms of activities, and thus do not present their findings in ways that make their relevance to activities obvious. Thus, it is not really so surprising that the findings of classroom research are not being transferred into the classroom. The teachers are being given abstract general principles and being left largely on their own to figure out how these abstract principles relate to the basic unit of teaching - the activity.

In fact, the failure to relate the principles taught in our teacher training courses directly to classroom activities results in the worst cases, in theory and practice being basically unconnected.

Some principles for structuring activities

Until researchers and teacher trainers explicitly relate the principles of learning to the structuring of activities - the unit that virtually all teachers use to organize their teaching - there will be only a little transfer from research to the classroom.

This last step, however, is mainly a matter of us combining what we already know about language learning with what we already know about structuring of activities - that is, with what we know about materials preparation, lesson planning, and so on.

Memory

What we know about memory tells us some things about how to structure activities. After all, language learning, in a very obvious way, is a matter of getting words, patterns, and meanings into memory in such a way that we can later retrieve them when we want to. As many writers have pointed out - Stevick, 1976, 1982, 1986; Schmidt, 1990; Thurgood 1989, the minimal requirement for learning seems to be that we notice something that is, we don't seem to learn much unconsciously. Clearly, a characteristic of most lessons is that they focus our attention, that is, they make us notice something. Thus, it also follows that highlighting various things during a lesson helps students with their own focus, and, thus with their learning.

Needless to say, a frequent pedagogical function of an activity is to focus the learner's attention. For example, in one of my favourite listening activities, the learner is constantly forced to distinguish between the /i/ of Keats and the /I/ of Kits in order to solve a puzzle. Given the structure of the activity, the learner has no choice but to notice and pay close attention to this distinction. Thus, in effect, it is the **task demands** that have focused the learner's attention on a particular linguistic characteristic of the text.

The ways an activity presents language may help with retention in memory: quantity: frequency; and quality: perceptual salience, clarity, number and quality of associations, and so on. **Frequency** is quite obvious; the more often an item is presented, the more likely it is to be retained. However, although frequency does play a part, other factors appear to be, if not more important, at least as important. The **perceptual salience** of the image is important; if something is difficult to hear (as with a bad tape-recording) or hard to see (as with a bad photo-copy), the amount that is retained is reduced considerably. The conceptual **clarity** of the image is important; the clearer the ideas are, the more the related language is retained. Thus, the wide-spread use of vivid visual images as mnemonic aids for idioms, such as a literal picture depicting the sentence 'Mommy says she has a frog in her throat'. Also important for retention are the **number of different associations**, that is, **multiple associations**, and the **quality of the associations** - that is, the clearer the associations, the more retention there will be.

Motivation - from a teacher's perspective

Certainly, the role of motivation is just as important to designing activities as is our knowledge of how memory works. Motivation, from a teacher's perspective, has to do with student behaviours: motivated students work productively at their tasks, they complete their assignments, and they maintain their concentration without needing constant encouragement and direction (Crookes and Schmidt, 1989:227). And, not surprisingly, teachers have long noticed that motivated students learn more than less motivated students.

If this is so, what are the features of activities and materials that increase motivation? Keller (1983; cited extensively in Crookes and Schmidt, 1989) lists a number of characteristics of motivation that can be built into the design of activities and materials.

Interest: It should come as no surprise that materials and activities that are interesting help learners learn. Note that this does not mean that the students have to be interested before they begin an activity, but rather that they find it interesting once they have started it.

Here, I feel compelled to defend students against a charge that is often unfairly leveled at them. Students, by and large, have the capacity to be interested in an enormous range of things. Just as I can be induced to eat almost anything given the right sauce, students can be interested in almost anything given the right packaging. And, assuming that there is something inherently interesting about the activity or materials, teachers can contribute to this potential student interest by pre-activity remarks.

Perceived personal relevance. Keller (1983:406; cited in Crookes and Schmidt, 1989:228) notes that for learners to pay attention over long periods of time, it is necessary that the learners perceive what is being learned as important to them for both practical and for personal reasons. If students cannot relate learning the material to their long-term goals, it will be quite difficult for them to

remain highly motivated. In this context, explaining the relevance of material to students is often beneficial.

It is also important that students see some short-term relevance to the material. Long-term goals such as learning the language, doing well in school, and preparing for a future career are important, but for the short-term, day-to-day motivation is needed to help students focus on the immediate task. A well-devised short-term goal - lesson after lesson - focuses their attention and improves their learning.

As an example, if a teacher tells her class at the beginning of a lesson that the material will be needed for a letter-writing activity at the end of the period, she provides valuable short-motivation for her students. The class pays attention because they need the information presented to write the letter. The short-motivation increases their focus, increases the amount of processing the students do of the material, and, as a result, increases the learning.

On a more personal level, materials are more motivating, if they meet some of our personal needs: the need for a sense of achievement the need for some control of our own world, and the need for affiliation with others. If an activity leaves students with a feeling of having achieved something, this increases their motivation. If an activity leaves students with a feeling that learning the material is within their power, motivation is increased; on the other hand, materials that are frustrating quickly kill motivation - they produce the feeling that there's no point in even trying. And, finally, activities that involve pleasant interactions with other students tend to increase motivation.

Positive self-expectations, the feeling that you have a real chance of success, have a real effect on motivation and, as a consequence, also have a real effect on success. Self-expectations are not unchangeable: as a result of their experiences, students develop their self-expectations. Thus, if we design activities which are not unreasonably difficult, students will develop the impression that events are under their control, and that effort will lead to academic success. When we are dealing with students with negative self-expectations, we should be particularly careful about trying to make sure that they achieve some degree of success.

Rewards and punishments. Of course, rewards and punishments do have some effects. However, by and large, the greatest reward seems to be that feeling of accomplishment that comes from succeeding at a task, with the kind of verbal praise that we can offer being a poor second to that. After years of teaching, I have come to feel that we get better results letting the students know we like them, than we do by trying to encourage them by praising their work. The experimental research, as far as I can tell, seems to bear this out.

Other factors such as appropriate content and the physical format are also important. There are, of course, constraints on what is interesting and thus appropriate for different age groups and for students with different backgrounds.

Structuring class groups

There is a myriad of research that suggests that group work is beneficial. On the personal level, group activities satisfy the need (Crookes and Schmidt, 1989:228) "for affiliation, and make it easier for a feeling of achievement to be attained, since it removes to some extent the need for one

individual's achievement to be attained at the expense of another's." In a cooperative setting, it is quite possible for virtually the whole group to succeed; in a more competitive setting, for each so-called 'winner', there are one or more 'losers' - something that can be quite destructive in the long run.

Information gaps. An information gap occurs when one person in an exchange knows something that the other person does not. Thus, the question 'What colour is your coat?' usually does not involve an information gap, unless one of the participants is blind. In contrast, the question between friends 'What are you doing tomorrow?' usually does involve an information gap, since the person asking the question presumably does not know the answer, while the person asked probably does.

Research suggests that the presence of an information gap is beneficial both in teacher-student exchanges and in group activities. In a teacher-student exchange, for example, Long and Sato (1983) have shown that when teachers ask referential questions, that is, questions that they do not already know the answer to, rather than display questions, that is, questions that both the teacher and the student know the answer to, several positive things happen: the quality of the talk improves, the quantity of the talk improves, and the amount learned seems to increase.

For group activities, Long (1989) has provided evidence for the superiority of two-way information gaps over one-way gaps - that is, if each of the participants knows something that the other does not. Similarly, closed tasks seem to be superior to open tasks. That is, tasks with an answer are superior to tasks with open ended answers. Here, the reason is fairly transparent. With a closed task, participants have no choice but to deal with the language involved in the task, since the information it contains is necessary to solving the problem; with open ended tasks, since it is known that there is no actual answer, participants are free to play it 'safe' and avoid whatever they do not understand.

Structuring teaching units

Finally, work needs to be done on the structuring of lessons - that is, how sub-activities, activities, and sequences of activities combine to form teaching units. For example, I think of a teaching unit as including three components usually presented sequentially:

- a. modelling - that is, an initial presentation of the material,
- b. illustrating, explaining, and connecting - that is, clarifying the material and connecting it with whatever else the students know, and
- c. working the material - that is, sufficient practice to at least partially get it into memory.

It is quite evident that the three components listed here are activities (or, strings of activities). Thus, as we understand what makes an activity effective, we should also learn more about what makes a teaching unit effective.

Further, almost all teaching units include two additional aspects, scattered throughout:

- d. checking for understanding - that is, comprehension checks scattered throughout the lesson (or, far less often and far less effective, a final cumulative comprehension check

- at the end of the lesson, like a test), and
- e. highlighting - that is, focusing on important features, scattered throughout the lesson.

However, much of this is quite impressionistic. Little serious research seems to have been done on activities, let alone on what constitutes an effective teaching unit.

Conclusion

If we are interested in improving the teaching of languages, where should our focus be? Certainly, not on methods. Neither our research focus, nor our teacher training focus should be on methods. Instead, both common sense and research findings suggest that our research focus and our teacher training focus should be on what happens in the classroom.

And, assuming that we are still interested in improving the teaching of languages, it also follows that the primary unit for description, for analysis, and for teacher training must be the materials and management that is, the activity. Administratively-dictated lesson plans notwithstanding, it is the activity, not the lesson plan, that is the unit teachers use to plan their lessons, to conduct their lessons, and even to recall their lessons. That is, the activity is the organizing unit for teachers.

All of this suggests some adjustments in what we see as important. For research, the adjustments are fairly obvious: the focus is on the classroom with the activities as the unit of analysis.

For teacher training, the adjustments are not quite as obvious: In part, what needs to be done is mainly a matter of combining what we already know about language learning with what we already know about structuring of activities -that is, with what we know about materials preparation, lesson planning, and so on. Some of this has been done in this paper. In part we have to make an understanding of activities a more central component of our courses. And, we need to recognize that the key to improving our language teaching lies in improving, not the theoretical component, but the practical component of our teacher training courses.

Methods or materials and management? Where should our focus be? Definitely, on materials and management - that is, on activities.

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