

Theory and Practice in TESL

KULDIP KAUR

University of Malaya

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine past research on methodology in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). The issues pertaining to methodology are significant in that different perspectives on method have influenced the design and procedures of classroom based instruction in TESL in different ways.

The choice of articles for this study has been influenced by the various historical, methodological and philosophical perspectives that have shaped language learning and teaching. The culmination of the procedural and theoretical bases for these perspectives are fundamental in shaping the future course of second language instruction. Since TESL is a relatively new field in educational settings, it is important to first describe the historical trends that have influenced classroom practices before describing the current state of methods in TESL.

A Historical Perspective of TESL

To date, the field of TESL has seen the emergence of three separate paradigms that have defined the theoretical background upon which classroom instruction is based. The first of these paradigms, which originated in the 1950's, takes a behavioral approach to second language teaching and learning. Under this approach, the major emphasis is on oral or written repetition, drill or memorization of English language words, phrases, or sentences. The behaviorists, or advocates of the drill-based method as they are known, believe that language acquisition takes place after learners practice listening and repeating patterned drills in English. Thus, the focus of instruction is on audio-lingual skills, while the theoretical base is that recognition must precede production of linguistic forms.

The second paradigm that has influenced second language teaching and learning is based on the cognitive approach which was generated in the 1960's. In contrast to the behavioral approach, the cognitive approach concentrates on the conscious learning and analysis of the grammatical rules and structure of the English language.

This is also known as the grammar-based perspective on TESL because here second language acquisition is viewed as a product of an understanding of the syntactic structure of the English language. Therefore, this approach takes the view that conscious learning of rules must precede linguistic production; otherwise language acquisition cannot take place.

The third paradigm, which evolved in the 1970's, focuses on the semantic nature of language, as opposed to the syntactic or phonological aspects of language. Under this communicative approach, TESL instructors focus on the meaning that is to be communicated by the learner, as opposed to focusing on audio-lingual practice or on the conscious learning of grammatical rules. The theoretical base for the communicative paradigm is that language acquisition takes place after learners understand how language is used to communicate meaning within contextualized situations. Thus, language is to be taught through meaningful communication, and learners are taught how language is used in the context of the situation under discussion.

Because three divergent paradigms in the field of TESL have emerged in the past four decades, two questions arise: "What is the state of TESL today?" and "How are the different theoretical orientations on method translated into practice?" The next section of this paper addresses these questions.

Our Practices, Assumptions and Recommendations

A review of past research reveals that one underlying issue defines the position of current practices in TESL: there is a problem caused by the merging and the polarization of methods that are based on the three different approaches to ESL instruction, viz, the behaviorist, cognitivist and communicativist paradigms. This problem can be discussed under three separate headings or sections that answer the following questions:

1. What do researchers say about current practices in ESL instruction?
2. What are the underlying assumptions that these researchers subscribe to in their description of methods?
3. What does past research recommend for good practice?

Practices

The current practices that govern the field of ESL instruction are largely characterized by the existence of too many syllabi and methods prescribing how ESL should be taught, and too many changes are proposed in methodology with little justification for adopting one method over another (Clarke, 1982; Richards & Rogers, 1982; Raimes, 1983). In an article entitled "On Bandwagons, Tyranny, and Common Sense," Clarke (1982) talked about how so-called "methods that work" have been based on prevailing theories dominating the field. These methods exercise a control over practitioners by forcing them to jump on different bandwagons that tour the ESL instructional market. Along a similar vein of protest, Richards and Rogers (1982) stressed that today, the field of TESL has "all kinds of things" that have resulted in syllabi based on the three different paradigms of second language learning. In practice, teachers have been unable to completely abandon methods based on the old paradigms (shaped by the behaviorists and cognitivists) in favor of newer trends (shaped by the communicativists). Instruction appears to be shaped by the intersection of syllabi

from the old and new theoretical bases, with little regard to how instructional practices are defined to result in effective teaching.

A great deal of this dissonance stems from the fact that the old paradigm does not completely address instructional concerns. For example, Raimes (1983) has stressed that methods based on the behaviorist and cognitivist traditions have led to teaching practices that lack contextual purpose and do not allow real communication to take place within the realm of classroom-oriented teacher-defined tasks. The problem is further confounded by the fact that the shift toward the new (communicative language learning) paradigm has resulted in a "common body of beliefs and assumptions" that has given rise to too many syllabi, techniques and methods (Raimes, 1983).

Zamel (1987) reiterated the points raised by Raimes (1983) in her work on writing research and pedagogy. Zamel found that ESL students are often given low-level, cognitively unchallenging tasks where the teacher acts chiefly as an examiner. There is too much attention paid to local problems (eg. errors in students' writing), and teachers fail to address meaning-related problems which are fundamental to language acquisition. These statements by Zamel further emphasize that instructional procedures still occur within the framework of the old paradigm, and that current research on pedagogy is neither informing nor transforming pedagogy in a truly desirable fashion (Zamel, 1987).

Assumptions

Underlying the body of research that laments the use and abuse of different methods in TESL is an inventory of assumptions that is both theoretically and philosophically derived. These assumptions are fundamental to instruction in general, and researchers address the assumptions underlying the problem of TESL from different positions.

The first of these positions is that there should be a direct relationship between research and practice (Zamel, 1987; Clarke, 1984; Richards & Rogers, 1982). This position prescribes that the models and methods that ESL teachers employ in classrooms should be based on the theoretical orientations from which they emerge. Thus, there is much to be gained from a carefully articulated theory, because a theory that has its roots in research calls for a careful examination of all the issues related to its implementation in practice.

The second position relates to the question of which method is best for ESL instruction. One principle that has been articulated by some researchers is that each method is intrinsically inadequate (Richards and Rogers, 1982; Clarke, 1982). Each method is implicit in its prescription of instructional procedure but not explicit in its scope of aiding second language acquisition and development. Another principle forwarded by several researchers suggests that there is no one technique, method, or procedure that is inherently good or bad. Thus, while there may be strengths and weaknesses of each technique, method or procedure, each aims to develop one or more facet(s) of the learner's language learning faculties. Admittedly, the success or failure of different instructional procedures is dependent on the context of their use as well as on the function that they intend to serve.

The above-mentioned positions relate to the assumption that, currently, there is a clear demarcation between ESL theory and ESL practice. This is a fundamental problem, and it is aggravated by the fact that the theoretical orientations of the old and new paradigms are vastly different from one another. If the distance between research and practice has to be bridged, then the prescription of

different methods may not provide an answer to the problem. Perhaps, it is the theoretical orientation of the practitioner that should help address the issue of what method, technique or procedure is to be employed in classrooms. Furthermore, if practitioners approached instruction from a theoretical perspective the problem of new methods being superimposed on old theories will not arise.

Recommendations

Past research on TESL recommends that practitioners employ instructional procedures that belong to the new paradigm, i.e. the communicative approach to second language learning. However, within this communicative framework, practitioners have to be aware of how their own practice relates to theories advanced in the field of instructional approach and methodology.

In defining an approach to TESL practice, Zamel (1987) recommends that alternative models of teaching should be given by researchers so that teachers can choose from a wide repertoire of instructional procedures to meet instructional goals. Furthermore, it is necessary for teachers to create an atmosphere in classrooms where risk-taking is encouraged, trust is established, and authority is shared so that the focus of the task is meaning-making and not an examination of linguistic competence. This aspect of pedagogy is recommended by Zamel to facilitate students' ability to develop a positive attitude toward their tasks and to demonstrate real growth in their performance. This recommendation by Zamel also operationalizes the communicative approach to second language teaching and learning, a statement that is not overtly stated by any of the other researchers examined in this study.

The recommendations on the use of methods in classrooms closely parallels the assumption that teachers should be aware of their own practices. Firstly, Clarke (1982) suggests that teachers should look at their own experiences in classrooms and measure the success and failure of each method they use accordingly. This recommendation puts the onus of choosing a prescription for ESL instruction upon the teacher. Teachers should not rely upon prescriptions that vary with the shifting momentum of theoretically-derived methodology that dominates the field. Secondly, teachers are being advised against abandoning instructional models completely (Watson, 1982). There are some models that work for some goals, and not other goals, and teachers have to keep their goals consistent with the methods they choose in their instructional procedures. What often happens when teachers rely on a single model is that only some of each learner's needs are addressed. There is a necessity to go beyond a single model of teaching, to seek different techniques that will address the needs of second language learners.

In contrast to the above point raised by Watson (1982), some researchers confirm the accusation by Clarke (1982) that bandwagons impose a certain control upon instructional practices: Oller (1983) prescribes the use of the episode hypothesis to enhance writing; Watson (1982) prefers a student-centered, process-oriented learning situation; and Clarke (1982) proposes that teachers use a collaborative interactional approach to teaching writing in ESL. While Oller (1983) recommends a specific method to teaching writing, both Watson (1982) and Clarke (1982) recommend an instructional framework to help teachers design their teaching procedures and behaviors. It appears that Clarke is in contradiction by proposing that teachers use the collaborative interactional approach to TESL. However, it is a theoretical approach on which he has focused his recommendation, not on a single method that is "supposed to work."

The Future of TESL

In an analytical review of research on TESL conducted over the past two decades, Long (1983) concluded that second language instruction does make a difference to second language acquisition. In his review, Long found that acquisition was faster for those individuals who had formal instruction over those who did not receive formal instruction. This finding has strong implications for the field of TESL: if instruction does indeed make a difference, then instructional programs should be designed in such a way as to promote acquisition.

However, with a field as young as the field of TESL being plagued by problems caused by too many bandwagons, too many syllabi and methods, and teachers being caught at the crossroads of the three different paradigms of TESL methodology, and of the tension between research and practice, it appears as if there lies a future of unchartered courses for all ESL researchers and practitioners alike.

For the future of TESL, it appears necessary for research to be carried out in the area of teacher cognition and professional development. What we do not have is knowledge about how teachers define their own theoretical orientations and how teachers define their own instructional procedures to fit into their beliefs about good instructional practice. Research in TESL has to move into the classrooms and teacher research, and away from a concentration on how second language acquisition takes place. A great deal of research has been done in the area of natural language learning environments with respect to both first and second languages, and another theory on how a second language is learnt may not benefit the field. If at all, it may create more confusion in a land already overpowered by methods and model procedures.

It is now time to move into the second language classroom to inform teachers and make them aware about their own instructional practices. The onus of good instructional practice rests on the teacher herself, not on prescriptive materials for day to day teaching. Furthermore, professional development has also suffered because too much research has focused on learning theories. If the researcher moves into the classroom, there may be more scope for bringing theory closer to practice, and perhaps redeeming the fate of the TESL profession.

References

- Clarke, Mark A. (1982). On Bandwagons, Tyranny and Common Sense. *TESOL Quarterly*, 18, (4), 437-448.
- Clarke, Mark A (1984). On the nature of technique: What do we owe the gurus. *TESOL Quarterly*, 18, (4), 557-594.
- Long, Michael H. (1983). Does Second Language Instruction Make a Difference? A Review of Research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17 (3), 359-382.
- Oller, John W. (1983). Story Writing Principles and ESL Teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17, (1) 39-53.
- Raimes, Ann (1983). Tradition and Revolution in ESL Teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17, 18, (6), 535-552.
- Richards, Jack C. (1984). The Secret life of Methods. *TESOL Quarterly*, 18, (1), 7-23.

Richards, Jacks C. and Rogers, T. (1982). Method: Approach, Design, and Procedure. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16, (2), 153-168.

Watson, Cynthia B. (1982). The Use and Abuse of Models in the ESL Writing Class. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16, (1), 5-14.

Zamel, Vivian (1987). Recent Research on Writing Pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21, (4), 697-712.

© Copyright 2001 MELTA