

Some Thoughts on the Notion of 'Better Methods'

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1. INTRODUCTION

JCLTA, May 1994 devoted an entire issue to the discussion of Chinese language pedagogy, in which the editor said that 'we should be united in our goal of maximum effectiveness in our teaching, and in our search for better methods.' This paper is in response to that call by offering some of my thoughts on the notion of better methods. It is my long belief that, if we want to maximize our effectiveness in teaching, one of the essential things is to understand fully the various methods and approaches in our field and find out not only what does not work but also what works with each method and then shift from one method to another to optimize teaching and learning. The first part of the paper will be a discussion of some of the principles related to language teaching and learning. In the second part I will review the various methods, discuss their contributions and flaws and demonstrate that no single method can take into account all the principles related to the nature of language learning. Finally I want to propose the framework for a 'new' diagnostic, multifaced approach.

2. SOME PRINCIPLES ON LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Foreign language teaching research has been contributed both by language teachers and by related disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, education etc. Based on the findings of these contributing disciplines, we may include the following as some of the principles related to language learning and teaching:

- (1) Language is a system of symbols by which people of a social group communicate, and language is based on syntax (rules of sentences), phonology (rules of sounds), morphology (rules of word formation), semantics (how symbols and meanings are related), and words.
- (2) Language is a social activity, and the choice of language patterns varies according to social function and personal intention.
- (3) Linguistic behavior involves innovation and formation of new sentences and new patterns in accordance with the rules of great abstraction.
- (4) The language learner should focus on the meaning and treat the form of the language as means not ends of language learning.
- (5) The ability to speak fluently cannot be taught directly, but develops independently in time after the learner builds up linguistic competence through sufficient practice in various meaningful contexts.
- (6) Learning skills may develop poorly without guidance, and therefore the teacher needs to help students develop good learning strategies.

- (7) Learning should be sequenced in order of difficulty and students acquire the language best by understanding input that is slightly beyond their current level of language competence.
- (8) In teaching, we need to highlight one particular skill at a time although we teach the skill in a holistic context, because our memory is limited to processing a certain amount at one time.
- (9) We learn best when we are enthusiastic, motivated and involved in a subject.
- (10) Psychology, linguistics and other disciplines may provide insights useful to language teachers, but it is the language teachers themselves who must validate or refute any specific proposals from others instead of accepting them on faith.

3. ANALYTICAL REVIEW OF SOME METHODS

As new theories emerge in the contributing disciplines, we find one teaching method succeeding another in popularity: 1) Grammar- translation (1840s-1940s), 2) the Direct Method (1910s), 3) the Oral Approach (1930s), 4) the Audiolingual Approach (1930s-1960s), 5) Communicative Teaching (1960s), 6) Functional-notional Approach (1970s), 7) the Silent Way (1970s), 8) Total Physical Response (1970s), 9) Community Language Learning (1970s), 10) Suggestopedia (1970s), 11) the Natural Approach (1980s), 12) the Proficiency Approach and many others.

Because of the limit of space, I will choose to review and critique five of them: the audiolingual method, the functional- notional approach, the community language learning, the natural approach and the proficiency approach.

3.1. THE AUDIOLINGUAL METHOD

This method reflects the views about language held by the structural linguists (Bloomfield, 1942; Fries, 1945; Lado, 1964; Pike, 1967) and the behavioral psychology (Skinner, 1957). They consider language use as a set of habits acquired primarily through imitation and repetition. The basic tenets of this method are (Chastain, 1976): 1) The goal is to develop in the students the same types of abilities that native speakers have. 2) The first language is not referred to in learning the target language. 3) The desired skills are acquired basically by setting up teaching and learning situations in which the students are conditioned to give correct response to oral or written stimuli, and students are not allowed time to think about their answers. 4) Pattern drills are to be taught without explanation. 5) Students learn to understand, then to speak, later to read and finally to write. Classroom procedures are: 1) Students hear a model dialogue. 2) Students practice by repeating the dialogue after the teacher or a recorder until they can distinguish the sounds and intonations. They repeat in groups and then individually until they memorize the dialogue. 3) Students do pattern drills, and explanation is kept to minimum; use of the first language is not encouraged. The purpose here is to enable the students overlearn the structure involved to the point of automaticity. 4) Students have an opportunity to use the patterns in a new context such as asking each other questions. In each teaching unit, there is a careful sequencing of activities in a continuously increasing level of linguistic difficulty. Throughout the sequence, the teacher is in control of all language practice to condition correct language habits. Learners play a reactive role by responding to the teacher's stimuli.

One of the obvious advantages of this method is the pattern drills which are good for developing structural awareness but caution should be taken that the structure should be taught as means to meaning, not as ends. Other good aspects include the emphasis on correct pronunciation and sequencing according to difficulty levels of the language structures.

Weak aspects of this method include: 1) It may neglect the innovative functioning of the learners because the emphasis on teaching is the pattern drills instead of allowing students open-ended, trial and error language practice. 2) It could be intimidating for students since it involves a lot of corrections of pronunciation and very limited use of the first language. 3) Reading and writing are not dealt with systematically. 4) It may ignore the individual differences in learning. 5) The focus on developing communicative competence is not clear and the activities could be boring if caution is not taken to transfer language skills to real communication.

3.2. THE FUNCTIONAL-NOTIONAL APPROACH

This method was originated from the influence of the functional linguists Firth and Halliday and sociolinguists Gumperz and Hymes. Wilkins' (1976) book of notional syllabuses was the first attempt to develop the functional-notional method. Work on this approach includes Johnson (1982), Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983), and Prabhu (1987). Principles of this method are: 1) The backbone of the course is based on language functions rather than units of grammar, or situations with a grammar focus. It would include lessons entitled 'expressing approval' or 'disagreeing' etc. 2) Emphasis is on meaning, contextualization, and communication. 3) Drilling is peripheral and learning occurs through struggling to communicate. 4) Language variation is central and sequencing is determined on consideration of interest. 5) The learner's first language or translation is accepted where feasible. Class procedures are: 1) The teacher selects a topic of interest such as 'expressing disagreement.' 2) The teacher presents words related to the topic such as 'disagree, reject' etc. 3) The teacher pronounces them, has students repeat them, and gives the native-language equivalent. 4) The teacher makes sentences with the words and has students listen or write the sentences down. 5) The teacher indicates some of the accepted ways that a native speaker would use to convey disagreement. 6) Students practice using the different words in dialogues. Other exercises include completing a dialogue in which words have been left out, or taking a prepared dialogue and changing it to a more formal or informal style, etc.

One of the advantages of this method is its function of teaching the connotative meanings of language and of providing cultural knowledge, which is very important for effective communication. Other advantages include: 1) It can focus on the learners' special needs since it centers around topic of interest instead of units of grammar. 2) The learning is motivating since the lessons are tailored for the students' special purposes.

Since the sequence is determined by topic of interest, caution should be taken when preparing materials. Otherwise, it would violate the principle that, in teaching, we need to highlight one particular skill at a time. If the text contains too many difficult words or structures which build on other concepts or structures that the students have not learned, it will inhibit learning. Therefore, both semantic and formal aspects should be integrated when deciding what to teach. Another disadvantage of this method is that the teacher has to do too much preparation. The teacher needs to select, adapt and invent many texts since the students may be oriented toward different purposes and have different interests. Sometimes it may be difficult to apply this method if the class is too diversified in terms of interests.

3.3. THE COMMUNITY LANGUAGE LEARNING

The community language learning is also known as Counseling Learning. This method was developed

by Curran (1976) who is more concerned with human relationships than with techniques of teaching. Language is viewed as a social process. Curran feels that there has been an unnecessary dichotomy between counseling and teaching--the former being interested in the individual's achieving insights and self-awareness that can stimulate personal development, fulfillment, and improved relations with others; the latter being too exclusively concerned with the intellectual learning process. In the counseling method, he feels the two emerge and learning is greatly stimulated through the development of self-worth and through a feeling of belonging and sharing with others.

The following are the procedures of this method: 1) Students sit in a circle with a recorder in the center, talk about whatever they are interested in. 2) The teacher walks around the circle as a resource person, waiting for students to take initiatives. 3) Beginning students may present to the teacher in their first language a message they wish to deliver. 4) The teacher listens and other learners overhear. 5) The teacher restates the message in the target language. 6) The learner repeats. 7) The student replays (from memory or tape) and reflects (in the form of class discussion) upon the message exchanged during the language class. 8) The students analyze their errors and work more on structures they need.

It is clear from the procedures that this method best accounts for the principle that we learn best when we are enthusiastic, interested and involved in a subject. However, there are some situations where the method cannot be used very successfully. For example, I have a class who come from different departments: English, linguistics, political science, economics, computer science, etc. One student may bring up a topic that other students do not feel interested at all. In this case, it will be difficult for the teacher to keep the whole class interested and involved. Another major problem with this method is that it does not account for the principle that, in teaching, we need to highlight one particular skill although we teach different skills in a holistic context. If a student brings up a topic which requires too many very complex grammatical structures, the teacher loses control of sequencing according to difficulty levels. When we consider the real situation in schools we realize other aspects that make the method difficult to use. First, it requires that teachers have to be fluent in both the students' first language and the target language. Second, it is said that the ideal class size for this is 6-12 students. Neither of these requirements is practical in many schools.

3.4. THE NATURAL APPROACH

The natural approach is proposed by Terrell and Krashen (1983). The principles are: 1) Comprehension proceeds production, i.e. listening and reading proceeds speaking and writing. The starting point in instruction is for the students to understand. They do not speak or write until they feel ready to. 2) Production is allowed to emerge in stages. In other words, students can start with responding in non-verbal communication, and then response with incomplete ungrammatical sentences, and finally with complete sentences and more complex discourse. 3) The course syllabus consists of communicative goals, which means that the classroom activity is organized by topic, not grammatical structure. 4) Classroom activities should focus at all times on topics which are interesting and relevant to the students and encourage them to express their ideas, opinions, desires, emotions and feelings.

Classroom procedures are: 1) The teacher chooses a topic of interest for the students. 2) The teacher speaks only in the target language, using statements, questions, commands and whatever contextual resources they can master in a classroom context to support comprehension. 3) The students are not

forced to respond, but required to focus their entire attention on comprehending what is said. At the beginning stage, the teacher uses such techniques as giving commands to students and having them act out what the teacher says, e.g. 'stand up, or turn around.' or using physical characteristics and clothing of the students to make the meanings of words clear: hair, brown, long, etc., or using pictures from magazines to introduce such things as 'the family are watching TV' or 'Tom has the picture of the sailboat.' 4) The teacher attempts to maintain a constant flow of comprehensible input by using repetition or paraphrase to increase comprehension. The authors emphasize vocabulary expansion and contend that, if the words are available to express ideas, students will successfully discover the appropriate syntax. 5) As they begin to acquire the language, students may respond in either broken target language or their first language. Students errors are ignored during class, unless there is some communication failure. 6) Students are grouped for communication activities such as 'interview': students are divided into pairs and are given a series of questions to ask the partner.

The focus on meaning is certainly desirable and the fact that students can wait until they are ready to talk may lead to a relaxed atmosphere. I think this method would work better with children than with adults. The method recognizes principles related to the natural development of language, but ignores some of the instructional principles and the individual learners' differences. For instance, presenting the language without reference to any grammar at the very first meeting may not work well with adult learners. It involves too much guessing on too many things such as the words, the syntax etc. and it may, to some extent, confuse and frustrate the learner. It would make the input more comprehensible if we rely on some grammatical explanation since some adults such as university students already possesses the ability to use grammar to aid comprehension. Another limitation is the absence of correction of errors. Both research and logical analysis show that the errors can become fossilized overtime without adequate correction.

3.5. THE PROFICIENCY APPROACH

The interest in the proficiency approach started to grow from late 1970s. Omaggio (1986) was one of the best attempts to develop the proficiency-oriented instruction of foreign language. She views the proficiency guidelines as an organizing principle for class construction and identified five working hypothesis (Omaggio, 1986:35): 1) Opportunities must be provided for students to practice using language in a range of contexts likely to be encountered in the target culture. Students should be encouraged to express their own meaning as early as possible after productive skills have been introduced in the course of instruction. 2) Opportunities should be provided for students to practice carrying out a range of functions to be necessary in dealing with others in the target culture. 3) There should be concern for the development of linguistics accuracy from the beginning of instruction in a proficiency-oriented approach. 4) Proficiency-oriented approaches should respond to the affective needs of students as well as to their cognitive needs. Students should be motivated to learn and must be given opportunities to express their own meanings in a nonthreatening environment. 5) Cultural understanding must be promoted in various ways so that students are prepared to live more harmoniously in the target-language community. She pointed out that there is no such a thing as one proficiency method; rather, virtually every method can be adapted to respond more directly to proficiency goals.

The major advantage of the proficiency-oriented method is the emphasis of giving students ample opportunities to learn language in meaningful contexts and apply their knowledge to coping with real life

situations. However we should move cautiously at the beginning of instruction so that we do not overwhelm our students and we do not ignore the building of a good foundation such as helping our students master the Chinese sound system and basic grammar systems. If we make sure that our teaching materials and our teaching methods are pedagogically sound, the emphasis of providing opportunities for students to apply their linguistic knowledge to coping with real life situations does not contradict with the building of important basics that are necessary for successful learning of Chinese. Some of the important basics are clearly described by Dew (1994) and Ling (1994).

According to the proficiency approach not only should we consider linguistic accuracy, but also consider content, context and function in planning our teaching. The description of the different levels according to function can serve as an organizing principle for our sequence of teaching, which means we should consider both linguistic complexity and the task-based difficulty in terms of function. It can also serve as an organizing principle for our spiralling in teaching, i.e. we should do spiralling both with linguistic units such as words and syntactic patterns and with proficiency tasks such as narrating, describing etc. A serious drawback of the current proficiency guidelines is that they are too general. They can only serve as organizing principles, not as instructional objectives.

Summary: The review above shows that no single method alone can fully explain all the principles related to language teaching and learning. I think the statement made by Mackey in 1978 about the field of foreign language teaching is still true:

It is likely that language teaching will continue to be a child of fashion in linguistics and psychology until the time it becomes an autonomous discipline which uses these related sciences instead of being used by them. To become autonomous, it will, like any science, have to weave its own net so as to fish out from the oceans of human experiences and natural phenomena only the elements it needs, and ignoring the rest, and be able to say with the ichthyologist of Sir Arthur Eddington: Whatever my net can't catch isn't fish (Mackey 1978:255).

In the remaining part of this paper, I will make an attempt to weave our own net in the area of teaching methodology by presenting the framework of a diagnostic multifaced approach.

4. WEAVING OUR OWN NET: A DIAGNOSTIC MULTIFACED APPROACH

In the framework of a diagnostic multifaced approach to foreign language teaching, the teacher is in charge of the whole process of teaching which consists of 1) selecting and sequencing what to teach, 2) motivating and presenting, 3) practicing and 4) building independence of communication.

The teacher needs to keep in mind the students' interests, strengths and needs in selecting and sequencing what to teach. We may integrate the proposals by both the structuralists and the functionalists. In other words, we can start teaching with a language function such as 'greeting.' But the language patterns used in the initial meetings can be simplified according to the students level of performance. As the students' language competence increases, we may come back to the same topic with more complex linguistic patterns.

The chief purpose of the phase of motivating and presenting is to make the input materials interesting, relevant and comprehensible for the learners. We need to adjust our methods of presentation according to

the individuals' strength. For example, if the learner is more analytical, we may use some explicit explanation, otherwise use a discovery method. When we want to teach words with connotative meanings or want to provide cultural knowledge, the functional approach may be desirable. We should also adjust our linguistic explanation according to our students ability. When we examine some of our textbooks about their grammatical explanation we find too many linguistic jargons which do not make any sense to our students who are not linguistics majors. I totally agree to Sanders (1988) who argues convincingly that linguistic analysis is essential to teaching Chinese but the analysis has to be articulated in the form of user-friendly and non-technical explanations.

Practicing should be focused on a highlighted skill and should be done in a communicative context. The major purpose in this stage is to obtain fluency or automaticity. Structured pattern drills are very useful. However, the pattern drills should be interesting and should be contextualized to ensure meaningfulness. The teacher should avoid conducting the pattern drills by using sentences that are of no relevance to the students interest. Bai (1992) offers some useful guidelines for designing classroom techniques for repeated practice. Yao and McGinnis (1988) and Zhengnan Zhang (1988) present many instructive ideas for us to motivate our students to practice what they learn.

To achieve the goal of building independence of communication, many of the cognitive methods such as community learning approach should be very useful. In any stage of teaching, the teacher needs to investigate the learner, the tasks and the materials, and the learning situation. The teacher should constantly ask the question: what method is good for whom in teaching what for what purpose in what situation. In order to get the answers much micro research studies are needed as mentioned by Light at the CLTA membership meeting of 1994. With all the information from our diagnosis and investigation and bearing in mind the advantages and disadvantages of various methods proposed by different contributing disciplines, the teacher can shift from one method to another as needed. In the remaining part of this paper, I will explain some of the areas we need to diagnose and how we can use the information from the diagnosis to help adjust our method of teaching.

First of all, we should examine the learners on such dimensions as their age, their cognitive style, their first language competence and purpose for learning the foreign language. For example, research (Chastain, 1976) shows that some learners are more analytical than others and more analytical learners do best when they are taught deductively. Wesche's (1981) study shows that when learners were matched with appropriate methods, e.g. analytic learners with analytic methods, they did disproportionately well, but when learners were mismatched, they did disproportionately badly. Therefore, when we teach these analytical learners a foreign language, it will be better to use some explicit explanations than to let them discover the rules of language by themselves. A knowledge of the learner's first language ability should be helpful. Questions we can ask include: 1) How much does the learner need to know to do the task? 2) How much does he already know about what we are teaching in his first language? 3) How can I structure for best learning? For instance, if we are teaching the word 'anthropology,' we need to know if the learner already knows the concept in her/his first language. If he does, a simple word-for-word translation will suffice. Otherwise, we may need to teach a whole concept by a discovery method. The purpose for learning is also important. If we are teaching a group who will become interpreters for the United Nations, we may use more of the audiolingual method. Scherer and Wertheimer (1964) compared 165 students from audiolingual classes and 124 students from traditional grammar classes over a two year period and found that students from audiolingual classes were superior in listening and speaking than the other students. However, the students from the traditional grammar classes were superior in

reading and translating.

Another area we should diagnose is the task and materials. For instance, a concrete noun such as 'cat' can be best presented by a simple translation, whereas an abstract verbal phrase would often be difficult to present by a simple word-for-word translation. According to my experience as a teacher and learner of foreign languages, word-for-word translation of verbal phrases always confuses the learner instead of facilitating learning. Thus, a discovery method is desirable when we teach complex phrases and structures.

The third area of diagnosis is the situation such as class size, teaching facilities, teachers etc. The questions we need to ask here is: do these factors allow the application of a certain method? For instance, the ideal size for the community learning method is 6-12 people and it also requires that the teacher speak both languages fluently. Can we use it as a primary method in a class of 50 students with a teacher who is not fluent in the students' first language? The answer would be no.

In summary, the diagnostic multifaceted approach requires the teacher to be an independent executive rather than a child of fashion in linguistics, psychology, or any other discipline. Teachers need to be well informed about the advantages and disadvantages of the various methods proposed by the contributing disciplines. Meanwhile teachers should be skillful diagnosticians and, through either informal observation or diagnostic tests, obtain adequate information on the learner, the learning task and the whole situation where learning occurs so that the teacher can adjust the teaching methods to maximize learning.

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