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Review of Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching, Third Edition

Reviewer: Elizabeth Maria Kissling

Book Title: Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching, Third Edition

Book Author: Diane Larsen-Freeman / Marti Anderson

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SUMMARY

The intended audience of this volume is a “teacher educator” interested in developing a repertoire of language teaching methods. The preface argues that training in methodologies, though certainly not without its critics (e.g. Hinkel, 2006; Rajagopalan, 2007), is useful to language teachers. The authors define the “techniques” in the volume’s title as the methods or actions teachers carry out in the classroom, and the “principles” as the thoughts (beliefs, attitudes, values, and awareness) of teachers that guide those actions. The techniques and principles must be connected and coherent for a language teacher to be successful.

The first eleven main chapters cover the following methods: The Grammar-Translation Method, The Direct Method, The Audio-Lingual Method, The Silent Way, Desuggestopedia, Community Language Learning, Total Physical Response, Communicative Language Teaching, Content-based Instruction, Task-based Language Teaching, and The Participatory Approach. This third edition contains a total of three new chapters; the chapter on “Content-based, Task-based and Participatory Approaches” in the second edition (2000) was broken into three chapters here so that each topic could be dealt with separately, and a final

chapter on emergent technologies was also added.

Most of the main chapters follow a standard format. First, a brief introduction serves to contextualize the emergence of the method as part of larger trends in education and related fields, or to address the failings of earlier methods.

Next, the “Experience” section provides a detailed observation report of a class in which a teacher employs the method. The context of the class varies across the chapters, from young children to adults, from English as a foreign language (EFL) to English as a second language (ESL), and from novice to advanced proficiency levels. The next section, titled “Thinking About the Experience,” provides a bullet-point list of teacher behaviors observed in the class, each paired with a guiding principle that motivated the observed behavior. These principles are expounded upon further in the following section, titled “Reviewing the Principles.” This section poses and answers a series of questions:

What are the goals of the teachers who use this method?

What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students?

What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process?

What is the nature of student-teacher interaction? What is the nature of student-student interaction?

How are the feelings of the students dealt with?

How is language viewed? How is culture viewed?

What areas of language are emphasized? What language skills are emphasized?

What is the role of the students’ native language?

How is evaluation accomplished?

How does the teacher respond to student errors?

A “Reviewing the Techniques” section provides an expanded explanation of several of the techniques most commonly associated with the methods, along with suggestions of how to implement the techniques in the classroom. A brief conclusion follows with exercises to check comprehension of the chapter and questions designed to help the reader make connections between the method and his/her own beliefs and behaviors.

The last two main chapters do not present particular methods but rather treat ancillary topics that complement the other methods. Chapter 13 first discusses the teaching of learning strategies and cooperative learning techniques,

providing an illustrative classroom observation report for each. This chapter also discusses multiple intelligences (e.g. logical, spatial, kinesthetic, verbal, etc.), drawing on the research of Armstrong (1994), Christison (2005), and Gardner (e.g. 2006, 2007) and provides several examples of classroom activities that fit each intelligence. Chapter 14 discusses emerging uses of language teaching and learning technologies, noting that technology can provide both teaching resources and enhanced learning experiences. The technologies highlighted are blogs, social networking, youtube, wiki, and electronic text corpora.

The concluding chapter points out some salient similarities among many of the methods, including the main goal of having students communicate in the target language, reliance on a synthetic or analytic syllabus (see Wilkins, 1976), and orthogonal treatment of culture. The concluding chapter also points out some salient differences between methods, both complementary (e.g. emphasis on one particular aspect of the language learning process) and contradictory (e.g. role of the first language, treatment of learner errors, and amount of control given to learners). The volume concludes with a discussion about how teachers should go about selecting the methods that are most coherent with their own beliefs, teaching context, and learners, even if the result is a sort of “principled eclecticism.” The authors note that learning to teach is a mutable process of self discovery.

EVALUATION

The introduction to each chapter is useful as a succinct explanation of when, how, and why each method developed in order to address the perceived shortcomings of previous methods. The introductory discussions of the later chapters are particularly illuminating, explaining how, for instance, communicative language teaching (CLT) is “fuzzy” in teachers’ understanding and how “this fuzziness has given CLT a flexibility which has allowed it to endure for thirty years” but also makes it harder to define as a set of particular techniques (p. 115), and how content-based and task-based language teaching (TBLT) are in essence “strong versions” of CLT and thus can look similar on the surface but in fact represent distinctive scopes and foci.

The classroom observation sections are particularly useful to those readers who

have not experienced certain methods first hand because they are contextualized and detailed enough to give the reader a sense of truly having observed a class. The observations detail, among other things, the physical arrangement of the classroom and participants, the instructors' use of teaching materials, management of student participation in the classroom interaction, and what is planned for subsequent class meetings. Each moment of the lesson is described in great detail.

The authors succinctly capture the essence of each method's guiding principles and perspective on the larger question of how languages are learned. The question-answer format makes it easy to compare various methods with regards to important considerations such as: "What is the role of the teacher?," i.e., is s/he an authority in the classroom (desuggestopedia), director of all student behavior (total physical response) or a counselor (community language learning)?; "What are the goals?," i.e., are they to enable students to communicate in the target language (CLT), to master both language and content (content-based instruction), or to teach language that is meaningful and to raise the political consciousness of students (the participatory approach)?; and "How is language viewed?," i.e., is language seen as primarily spoken but not written (the direct method) or is language for "doing" (TBLT)? Unfortunately, because these "Reviews of the Principles" present many of the same ideas as those in the "Thinking About the Experience" sections, and often use identical wording, these sections come across as unnecessarily repetitive.

Many of the techniques presented in connection with each method are supplemented with a concise, practical step-by-step guide for how to implement the technique in class, as well as its pedagogical rationale. The presentation of the dictogloss is a good example:

In a dictogloss (Wajnryb, 1990), students listen twice to a short talk or a reading on appropriate content. The first time through, students listen for the main idea, and then the second time they listen for details. Next, students write down what they have remembered from the talk or reading. Some teachers have their students take notes while listening. The students then use their notes to reformulate what has been read. Students get practice in note-taking in this way. Next, they work with a partner or in a small group to construct together the best version of what they have heard. What they write is shared

with the whole class for a peer-editing session. Through these processes, students become familiar with the organization of a variety of texts within a content area (p. 142).

However, some of the techniques are given much more superficial treatment. For example, the information-gap task is explained merely as “the exchange of information among participants in order to complete a task” (p. 158). This could have been supplemented with explanation about how information-gap tasks are purported to promote negotiation of meaning, how changing the dimensions and conditions of a task can promote more or less negotiation of meaning, or why negotiation of meaning in interaction is thought to be beneficial for language learning (see for example Van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, 2009). Also, only two to eight techniques are reviewed in each chapter, so teachers might desire a more exhaustive list.

The chapters are presented in a roughly chronological order, and the later chapters are relatively more comprehensive in their coverage than the earlier chapters, particularly in terms of their recognition of related pedagogical practices and considerations. For instance, the whole language approach is discussed in connection with content-based instruction, and project work is discussed in connection with TBLT. In connection with the participatory approach, a range of subjects is broached, including which English should be taught, critical discourse analysis, non-native speakers as teachers, and hidden curriculum. This difference in coverage could give the impression that recent methodological developments have greater theoretical or empirical evidence for their efficacy than methods developed earlier, though the authors claim to have an “agnostic stance,” advocating for no one method over another.

The later chapters also are lacking in practical suggestions for the language teacher. In connection with the participatory approach, only two specific techniques are mentioned, dialoguing and problem posing, and both could have benefited from much more explanation about how to implement those techniques successfully in the classroom. The same criticism could be made of the chapter on emergent technologies, which would have been improved by suggestions for implementation, along the lines of how to balance communicative skills (rather than overly relying on written texts), negotiate issues of online safety, or create cohesive lessons. The review of the techniques in the technologies

chapter will likely be of use only to the internet neophyte. Most teachers would benefit from advice on how to create and use wikis successfully in their language teaching more than an explanation of what Wikipedia contains.

In sum, this volume is a clearly written introduction to language teaching methods that includes many concrete examples and practical advice for teachers. The jargon-free writing style, avoidance of prescriptivism, and emphasis on self-reflection while selecting teaching methods makes it especially suited to novice language teachers.

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