THE SECRET LIFE OF METHODS*

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"Today's Methods are tomorrow's memories."
Ted Plaister

This paper addresses two questions:

1. How do Methods of language teaching differ from one another?
2. What factors are responsible for the spread of Methods?

I hope to demonstrate that while fundamental differences between methods often relate to different views of the nature of language, or to different instructional theories, the reasons for the rise and fall of Methods are often independent of either of these factors. To understand the role of language theory, instructional theory and implementation factors in Methods, is to know their Secret Life.

1. Methods and Language Theory: How language content is defined.

By a Method I refer to a language teaching philosophy that contains a standardized set of procedures or principles for teaching a language based upon a given set of theoretical premises about the nature of language and/or language learning (Richards and Rodgers 1982). There are essentially two routes to the development of Methods in language teaching. One is through the syllabus, that is, the way language content is defined and organized. The other is through instructional procedures. Although

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syllabus and instructional procedures are often interdependent, they need not be, and the very diverse method options available today reflect the fundamentally different assumptions behind these two approaches to method development.

The Syllabus Route

All Methods are concerned with creating opportunities for learners to acquire language. But Methods may define language differently. For some, language is identified with grammar and vocabulary. For others, it is an abstract set of semantic, syntactic, and lexical features. For still others, it is the ideas, concepts, and norms of social behavior humans exchange and manifest in daily life. Each of these is a particular view of language content. Each is an account of what we ultimately teach, that is, a model of a language syllabus. Many current issues in language teaching, such as the Notional-Functional syllabus, or the English for Specific Purposes approach in program design, reflect the influence of particular accounts of language content, and specific proposals as to what the syllabus underlying a method should contain.

The first major attempts to elaborate a systematic and rational foundation for Methods in the 20th century arose out of the movement towards "vocabulary control" in the 1920's and 30's. This movement saw vocabulary as a major component of a language syllabus. It led to word frequency lists, to Basic English (Ogden 1930), to the Interim Report on Vocabulary selection (Faucett 1936), and to the General Service List (West 1953). These were the products of people like Palmer and West, Bongers

and Ogden, who attempted to introduce a scientific or empirical basis to syllabus design (Mackey 1965).

Palmer had a parallel interest in grammar, but not the grammar of the grammar-translation method. For Palmer, grammar was the system underlying the patterns of speech. It led to his development of Substitution Tables and to his book A Grammar of Spoken English (Palmer and Blandford 1939), and laid the foundation for work by Hornby, Mackin and others on grammatical syllabuses (Hornby 1954). With the development of systematic approaches to the lexical and grammatical content of language courses, and with the efforts of specialists such as Palmer and West in using these resources as part of a comprehensive methodological framework for the teaching of English as a foreign language, the foundations for the British approach in TEFL were firmly established. The graded sequence of sentence patterns and structures which served as syllabuses for courses and course materials was known as a structural syllabus. The use of such a syllabus together with a situational approach to contextualizing and practicing syllabus items became known as the 'Structural-Situational Approach' (Widdowson 1972).

In the United States, the applied linguistic foundations of language teaching developed several decades later than the British effort, but led to similar results. This time the word lists were produced by Charles Fries and colleagues at the University of Michigan (Fries and Traver 1942) and the Substitution Tables became the 'frames' which served as the basis for 'pattern practice.' The model of the content of language that Fries used

however was more up to date, borrowed from a paradigm developed by American linguists in the 1930's and 40's. Charles Fries was trained in structural linguisics, and when he became director of the University of Michigan's English Language Institute in 1939--the first ELI in the USA--he applied 'structuralism' to language teaching and syllabus design. The result was the Aural-Oral Method (Fries and Fries 1961).

The view that the content of language can be defined principally in terms of vocabulary and grammar has had a lasting influence on Methods. As we shall see later, it is basic to the views of such Method 'innovators' as Asher and Gattegno. It was firmly entrenched in the Audiolingual Method that swept foreign language departments in North America in the late 50's and 60's. It was only minimally affected by the views that Chomsky launched upon linguistics in the 60's and which manifested briefly in language teaching as the 'cognitive-code' approach.

But the first serious challenges to this view of language arose in the late 60's, leading to the concept of Notional syllabuses on the one hand (Wilkins 1976), and to the English for Specific Purposes movement on the other (Robinson 1980). Both reject the lexico-structural syllabus model and propose an alternative view of syllabus content.

To understand the motivation for the rejection of the lexico-structural syllabus we need to make explicit some of the assumptions behind it. The chief of these was that once the basic vocabulary and grammar had been learned, the learner would be able to communicate effectively in situations where English

was needed for general and non-specified purposes. The Structural-Situational, Aural-Oral, and Audiolingual methods were all designed to teach English for General Purposes, (or ENOP--English for No Obvious Purpose, as it is sometimes known).

The Notional-Syllabus proposed by Wilkins, simply redefined the language content needed for English for General Purposes, to include not only grammar and vocabulary but the notions or concepts the learner needs to communicate about, the functional purposes for which the language is to be used, the situations in which the language will be used, and the roles the learner might typically be playing. Such a view of language reflects a movement from a grammatical to a communicative account of what it means to know a language. In trying to put such a proposal into practice, the Council of Europe elaborated a now well known version of such a syllabus: the Threshold Level (Van Ek and Alexander 1975). This is a description of the content of English when it is being taught for general communicative purposes.

In circumstances where English is being taught for specific and narrowly defined purposes rather than for a more general communicative goal, the content of language can no longer be identified with the same grammar, vocabulary, notions, topics, and functions which serve the needs of English for General Purposes. Rather, the specific linguistic requirements of the target learners will have to be determined as a basis for syllabus design, and this is the philosophy behind ESP. This is a cost-effective approach to language teaching, which advocates teaching only the content which particular groups of learners require.

It begins not with an analysis of the language code but with a determination of the learner's communicative needs. Only then can the learner's language needs be determined.

Structural-Situational, Aural-Oral, Audiolingual, Notional-Functional and ESP approaches to language teaching, while seemingly odd bedfellows, have one thing in common. They are built around content variables. They each make concrete proposals for a language syllabus, and the syllabus forms the basis for subsequently determined instructional procedures. But an alternative route to the development of Methods is available, one based not on language content as the starting point but beginning from a theory of learning and teaching. Methods such as the Silent Way, Counseling Learning, the Natural Approach, and Total Physical Response have in common the fact that each is an outcome and an application of a particular theory of language acquisition and/or a particular pedagogical philosophy.

2. Methods and Instructional Theories

An Instructional Theory in language teaching draws on a psycholinguistic theory of language learning and a particular account of Teacher-Learner roles in the teaching process. It includes the following components.

a) a psycholinguistic dimension containing a theory of learning, that describes learning strategies and processes and which specifies the conditions for success or failure in language learning.

b) a teaching dimension, containing an account of the role of teachers and learners in the instructional process (i.e., the

tasks they are expected to carry out, their functions as performers, initiators, problem solvers, their degree of independence and control over the content of what they learn and how they learn it), and a description of the learning experiences and procedures that will be used. (Richards and Rodgers 1982; Richards 1983).

We can classify methods according to whether they primarily represent reactions to Content and Syllabus issues, or to Instructional issues. A notional-functional view of a syllabus, for example, and an ESP approach to course design make no assumptions about instructional theory. It would not be logically inconsistent to have a Notional-Functional syllabus implemented through Silent Way procedures since the concept of a Notional syllabus is independent of any particular instructional theory. It is true that instructional procedures may appear wedded to particular syllabus models. For example, a Notional-Functional syllabus is often implemented via 'Communicative' procedures, and a structural syllabus via Aural-Oral/pattern practice techniques, but these pairings are by no means inevitable.

Methods such as Total Physical Response, the Natural Approach, and Counseling Learning on the other hand, operate without an explicit syllabus model. The contributions of Method developers such as Asher (1977), Curran (1972), and Gattegno (1976) result from individual instructional theories, from personal philosophies and theories of the factors and procedures that promote successful learning. Asher, Curran, and Gattegno came to language teaching from backgrounds in different disciplines: psychology,

counseling, education. They were prompted not by reactions to linguistic or sociolinguistic issues, but by their personal visions of how the individual's learning potential can be maximized.

Asher's Total Physical Response, for example, is designed to provide language learning experiences that reduce the stress and anxiety adults experience in foreign language learning. "The task is to invent or discover instructional strategies that reduce the intense stress that students experience" (Asher 1977:2). One way to reduce stress is to delay production and to build up receptive competence first. One of the primary conditions for success is through relating language production to physical actions, as Harold Palmer had advocated twenty years earlier.

> In view of the fact that talking activities are invariably preceded by a more or less long period of purely receptive work, mostly in the form of reacting physically to verbal stimuli, it would seem to be no exaggeration to state that the execution of orders is a prerequisite to the acquiring of the powers of expression . . . no method of teaching foreign speech is likely to be economical or successful which does not include in the first period a very considerable proportion of that type of classroom work which consists of the carrying out by the pupil . . . orders issued by the teacher (Palmer and Palmer 1959:39).

But Asher's view of langugage is not far removed from the lexico-grammatical conceptions of the 20's and 30's. Asher accepts this as a given, but proposes alternative procedures for teaching it. His method depends not on published materials, but allows the teacher to develop her own syllabus and materials as long as the recommended instructional procedures are followed.

Curran's Counseling Learning is likewise predicated upon assumptions about how people best learn, rather than on assumptions

about the nature of language. It is based on Curran's 'whole-person' model of learning, and is an application of group counselling procedures. Curran saw the problems of adult foreign language learning as resulting from emotional or 'affective' barriers created by learners, and his method is designed to counter the anxiety and negative emotions of defense assumed to impede foreign language learning by adults.

For Curran, learning is a social phenomenon that takes place within the supporting environment of a 'community' of one's fellow learners. Language learning involves a progression from total dependence on the teacher (the counsellor or 'knower,' in Curran's terms), to a mature independent relationship. As with Total Physical Response, there is no predetermined syllabus nor materials in Curran's approach. Specific linguistic or communicative objectives are not provided, which means it is ultimately a teacher-dependent approach in which procedure, rather than content, is specified.

Gattegno's Silent Way likewise draws on his individual philosophy of learning. This involves consciously using the intelligence to heighten learning through listening, generalizing, and expressing oneself. The teacher is trained to engage students in experimenting, practicing, and problem-solving, and the teacher is relatively silent for much of this process. Language is presented through pictures, objects, or situations, to enable links to be made more directly between sounds and meanings. Word charts, pictures, and colored rods are used to stimulate speech. There is a strong linguistic focus to Silent Way. Vocabulary,

grammar, and accuracy are emphasized, although mastery of language is claimed not to be the only goal.

> Learning is not seen as the means of accumulating knowledge but as the means of becoming a more proficient learner in whatever one is engaged in (Gattegno 1972:89).

I mention these three Methods not because they are any more or less convincing than proposals by Terrell, Lozanov, and others, but because they reflect so clearly a primary concern with instructional theory and procedures rather than with syllabus issues. Whereas in the case of the Structural-Situational, Aural-Oral, or Notional-Functional approaches, the development of classroom techniques follows the prior specification of objectives or syllabus content, with Total Physical Response, Counseling Learning, and Silent Way, the syllabus is an outcome of the instructional procedures. TPR and CL allow the teacher to develop his or her own syllabus. What they and others have in common is a blueprint for classroom procedures that links language learning assumptions to an interactive view of teachers and learners. As Gattegno observes modestly of his own approach:

> The proposals made . . . work much better than any other currently available, because for the first time the learners in their concreteness are taken into account. This is a completely new idea in education. It was much easier to be concerned with languages and their steadiness than with moody and unpredictable boys and girls, and men and women whose appearances revealed nothing about their functionings (1972:v-vi).

Implementation Factors

So far my account of the two different kinds of issues which methods are a response to has not uncovered any dramatic secrets. But Methods have a life beyond the classroom, beyond the questions of content, philosophy and procedure which characterize

them. The rise and fall of Methods depends upon a variety of factors extrinsic to a method itself, and often reflects the influence of fads and fashions, of profit-seekers and promoters, as well as the forces of the intellectual and educational marketplace. It is these factors that give a Method its secret life, and to which we now turn.

The Quest for Legitimacy

Firstly, Methods need professional recognition to gain credibility. They need to be acknowledged as philosophically legitimate responses to genuine educational issues, rather than the personal beliefs of articulate and persuasive promoters. This quest for recognition by teachers, and particularly by the academic community, may take several forms:

a) Appeals to facts: this rarely followed option involves empirical demonstration of the validity of a method's claims, for example, through documented research which demonstrates precisely what learners achieve as a result of instruction. This route is difficult to carry out, and since its findings may not necessarily be the ones we hoped for, there is little of it in the literature. Consequently, there is not a single serious piece of research published to demonstrate precisely what learners learn from a Notional syllabus, from Communicative Language Teaching, Silent Way, or most of the other Methods which countless journal articles advocate with such enthusiasm.

Sometimes pseudo-research is offered instead, in the hope that the difference will not be noticed. Lozanov for example, cites what appears to be research to justify his extravagant

claims, but on closer examination his 'experiments' turn out to lack proper research design and have no value in supporting the claims they are supposed to justify.

b) An alternative way of establishing validity is through appeals to authority, that is, by referencing current theoretical constructs or recognized authorities in the field. Thus Terrell's Natural Way (Terrell 1982) cites Krashen's input hypothesis, tracts on Communicative Language Teaching (Brumfit and Johnson 1979) cite Halliday and Hymes, Widdowson and Wilkins; and promotional literature on Counseling Learning quotes Earl Stevick.

While legitimacy is a desirable attribute for a Method, a more basic factor determines how well known or widely used it is likely to become, namely the form in which a method proposal is presented. Some Methods exist primarily in the form of materials, i.e., (a) a textbook which embodies the principles (if any) of selection, organization, and presentation of content that the method follows, together with (b) a set of specifications as to how the materials are to be used. Structural-Situational, Aural-Oral, and Notional-Functional approaches to teaching or Syllabus design provide principles which can be used in writing textbooks. This gives them a decided advantage over instructional philosophies which are dependent solely upon the teacher's skill and ingenuity and which do not provide a basic text. The former --the text-based methods--can be used without special training. The latter may require teachers to undertake special courses, involving an investment of both time and money. Consequently, methods that lead to texts have a much higher adoption and

survival rate than those which don't. Audiolingual and 'communicative' Methods are widely known for this reason; they merely require a teacher to buy a text and read the teacher's manual. Methods such as those of Lozanov's (Lozanov 1979) or Gattegno's on the other hand, are known in practice only to those who have received special training in their use.

Publish or Perish

Where there are student texts and the possibility of widespread adoptions and sales, there are also publishers. If an abstract concept like that of a Notional syllabus can be applied to the production of textbooks, publishers have everything to gain by making such concepts comprehensible and widely known. The terms Notional-Functional, Communicative Approach, and even Threshold Level, sell. Many an underpaid academic has consequently succumbed to attractive offers to lightly work over an audiolingual or structural course so that it can be published in a new edition bearing a notional-functional or communicative label. Publishers promote texts at conferences, book exhibits, and through direct visits to schools and institutions. And they finance workshops and lectures by authorities whose names lend credence to the philosophies behind the texts. The message is that if you have an innovative instructional philosophy to market, make it dependent upon the use of a student text. If not, no major publisher will take you seriously. Publishers associated with Notional-Functional or Communicative Approaches in language teaching are hence major international publishing houses. The publishers of Asher's, Curran's, and Gattegno's works, on the other hand, are do-it-yourself

presses such as Sky Oaks Productions, Apple River Press, and Educational Solutions.

Sanctions from on High

But Methods need more than the support of the publishing industry to gain credibility. They need to be sanctioned by professional teaching organizations; they need the visibility which adoptions by universities and educational agencies afford ; with luck they may be prescribed by departments of education and even governments.

In 1902, for example, the French Minister of Education gave official approval to the Direct Method. It became the only approved method for teaching foreign languages in France, and in the same year it also became the approved method in Germany. This could have meant a boon for publishers, except that the Direct Method was a philosophy of instructional procedures rather than a specification for syllabus design and materials production. Like the Silent Way and Counseling Learning, it could not readily be translated into textbooks and materials and this was one reason why it failed to survive, despite the support it received in high places. More recently in France, the Audio-Visual-Method received the sanction of the Département de la Coöpération, through its widespread use of the series Voix et images de France for teaching French abroad. The audio-visual-method continues to enjoy the prestige that accrues from having being the 'official' French method for so many years.

Universities and academics likewise play a crucial role in influencing the fate of methods. The Michigan methodology of

the 50's embodied in the work of Charles Fries and Robert Lado and their Michigan Associates was sold as much on the basis of its association with that prestigious institution as through its content. The well-known Michigan series--the blue, green, and yellow books--based on the principles of the Aural-Oral method, reflected the scientific principles that America's first English language institute proudly acknowledged. They were supported by Fries' definitive texts on language learning and teaching, and by Lado's work on contrastive analysis. The philosophy behind the materials was spread through the pages of Michigan's own journal--Language Learning, the first journal devoted to the new 'science' of applied linguistics. Consequently, in the 1950's, the Michigan approach and the Michigan materials became nothing less than "the American way," the orthodox methodology of American English specialists in both the United States and abroad. Under such circumstances, it was hardly courteous to question the soundness of the materials themselves. In the late 50's and 60's the same sense of American self-assuredness and national pride helped consolidate the status of the then American orthodoxy--audiolingualism.

National styles of thought and practice have likewise played an important part in spreading British views of methodology. Ideas spread rapidly in that small island, and British applied linguists have over the years advocated a relatively uniform view of methodology. This has been disseminated rapidly and in a standardized manner through the auspices of a governmental agency of international scope--the British Council--which since

the late 1930's has been actively involved in promoting the teaching of English the British way. Among the various activities of the council are involvement in the direct teaching of English in many parts of the world, advisory and consultancy services to governments and their agencies, and the joint publication with Oxford University Press of English Language Teaching Journal --a powerful organ of British EFL orthodoxy.

The British Council has for many years served the interests of British methodologists by providing an instant and international outlet for their ideas. It is doubtful if Communicative Language Teaching or the British approach to syllabus and program design could have been established so rapidly without the Council's help. John Munby, for example, is a British Council employee. Even before the publication of his book, Communicative Syllabus Design (Munby 1978), in which a model for the design of ESL courses is proposed, the Munby model had been adopted by the Council, presented in Council-sponsored workshops, and used as the basis for several Council consultancy projects. At British Council centers around the world, a coordinated and centralized approach and policy is followed. Application of the ideas in such books as Notional Syllabuses, Communicative Syllabus Design, and Threshold Level, was immediate, though sometimes on the desks of Council language specialists, one sees the familiar cover of Allen's Living English Structure (Allen 1955) half-hidden at the botton of the pile. No one can blame the British for selling things British. But I wonder what the consequences for our field might have been if, in the early 70's, the Council had adopted

Curran's or Gattegno's methods as a basis for their global language teaching operations?

From Methods to Methodology: The Public Death of Methods

The life of Methods is thus a complex one. But what role should Methods play in our professional life? How are we to respond to the competing claims of different Methods? And how relevant are the issues Methods focus on to the field of ESL?

One common element that links the Methods I have discussed is that they are all responses to situations where the reasons for which English is being studied have not been clearly articulated. But if we reject the premise that there is such a thing as English for General Purposes, and accept that it is possible to treat all language teaching situations as cases of English for Special Purposes, that is, as circumstances where particular needs and goals are to be addressed, it is possible to assign method questions their appropriate place within the broader process of curriculum development, instead of using Methods as a substitute for curriculum planning.

The tools of curriculum development are well established in other fields (e.g., cf. Pratt 1980), and in language teaching take the form of:

(a) Needs analysis and identification: determination of the tasks, activities, and behaviors learners ultimately need to be able to perform in English,

(b) micro-skill identification: analysis of these tasks, activities and behaviors to determine the underlying linguistic skills and abilities needed to perform them,

(c) assessment and diagnosis of the learner's present abilities with respect to these skills and tasks;

(d) preparation of instructional objectives that reflect realizable goals within the constraints of existing resources;

(e) methodology, i.e., selection and organization of learning experiences needed to attain the objectives,

(f) evaluation of the outcome.

If language teaching is approached from the perspective of curriculum development, a much greater importance accrues to needs analysis, identification of the individual microskills which reading, writing, listening, and speaking entail, diagnostic testing, setting objectives, and measurement and evaluation. The important issues then are not, which Method to adopt, but how to develop procedures and instructional activities which will enable these objectives to be attained. This is not a question of choosing a Method, but of developing Methodology. This requires the use of accepted principles of program design and evaluation, from which gains in particular aspects of language proficiency can be related to use of particular instructional procedures. We are no longer concerned with the choice of one Method or another, but with a clearer understanding of the processes of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and with the development of tasks, procedures, and activities that develop different aspects of these skills (cf. Richards 1983). To try to interpret the complexity of vastly different learning situations from the global perspective of a single instructional or syllabus model is both naive and vacuous; naive, because it

fails to acknowledge the nature of curriculum development in language teaching; vacuous, because it adds nothing to our understanding of language teaching to attach meaningless labels or brand names such as 'Natural,' 'Communicative' or 'Whole-Person,' to the principles or procedures we use. To do so encourages intellectual fossilization, because it suggests that the answers to complex issues can be found through applying pre-packed solutions which are equally applicable in all situations. What is more important is to be able to demonstrate measurable gains in proficiency that particular techniques or procedures bring about.

This discussion of the secret life of Methods has attempted to bring to light some facts about Methods, and some less often talked about aspects of their evolution. My hope is that an awareness of the secret life of Methods might hasten the public death of Methods. We will then be able to focus more clearly on the relevant facts of curriculum development and methodology, rather than be distracted by the unsubstantiated and irrelevant claims of Method promoters.

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