

What Principles Guide Your Teaching Practice?

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Summary: This article is an exploration and historical survey of teaching practices, told through a personal lens. The purpose is to help teachers reflect on their own personal journey in teaching and to examine what practices they have used and still use in the classroom. It also offers some suggestions for practical application of macro-strategies in teaching.

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I had no idea what I was doing the first time I walked into an English as a second language classroom. On that day, I was volunteering to substitute for an absent teacher at a refugee and immigration center. As I faced a group of about 20 students from the Ukraine, Laos, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Armenia, my palms were sweating, my face was sweating, and I even believe my voice was sweating. It did not help much that a week before at the same center, I watched a teacher conduct a class by merely using a series of hand signals, gestures, and facial contortions. Later, he explained to me that he was using **The Silent Way** (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) and he swore by its efficacy—"the only language teaching method you will ever need," he said. I managed to muddle my way through that first lesson using my own interpretation of his instructions. Despite possibly giving a Hmong woman or two a fright with my facial expressions, I think they all got something out of it. I could see the benefits of this method, but as a total system for teaching, I did not think it would suit me.

Fortunately, I had the opportunity to work with another teacher at the center who introduced me to what she called **The Language Experience Approach** (Taylor, 1992). I had asked her previously if she had used The Silent Way and she said, "No, I prefer the Talky, Talky Way." This method consisted of having the students draw pictures of their experiences, writing captions for the pictures at whatever level they were at (as simple as a word, as complex as a paragraph). The students could then orally explain their picture stories to other students. The teacher's role was mostly to facilitate; occasionally the teacher could add one or two grammar or lexical items to the story.

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Students could also collaborate to add a word or two to another story if one student was at a higher level than another, and if the context of the situation was appropriate for that type of interaction. Before I had even heard the name Lev Vygotsky (1978), I was introduced to a method that was meant to bridge the gap between learner knowledge and mentor competence. This way of teaching was much more suitable to my personality, yet I could see it also had its limitations. One more teacher at the same language center ran her class like a military sergeant (granted, a military sergeant who smiled a lot) as students merely engaged in substitution drills the whole time. I experimented with this method, and found it useful within limits, but did not think that I would use this method the whole time or as the main focus of my teaching.

Around this same time, I had the opportunity to sit in on a class at a community college. I had a brief meeting with the teacher before, but he did not give me much clue as to how he taught. When he arrived to class, he was carrying two enormous suitcases, proceeding to unload the items on some tables at the side of the room: play money, toy cars, skillets and spatulas, wigs, cups, bottles of water, play houses, hammers, wooden boards, nails, and an assortment of many other items. Fairly quickly the class was a whirl of activity, with first the teacher, and then the students, barking orders at each other to give, pour, hammer, drive, shave, comb, pay, receive and do just about every human activity one could think of that could be accomplished with the items in his suitcase. I was to discover later that this was referred to as the TPR method of teaching or **Total Physical Response** (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Later, when I went to Japan to teach for a language school, I attended workshops that introduced other promising language teaching methods. One workshop was about the **Present, Practice, Produce** method (PPP, n.d.). Teachers presented linguistic or topical input, the students practiced it in a controlled exchange, and then produced it in a somewhat freer, more meaningful exchange. Another workshop was about how all of teaching could be turned into a game. A workshop for teaching children introduced some methods that seemed to employ both game-playing practices and elements of the **Silent Way**. Instructions for teachers were to rely on certain gestures and also to make exaggerated faces to illustrate the various emotions. When I tried this later in my own class, attempting, as the guide had said, to “look quizzical, with an expression of extraordinary wonder and curiosity on your face,” one little girl burst into tears. As I further progressed in my teaching career, as well as in my education, I eschewed certain methods that seemed less pedagogically sound than others. Nevertheless, I did retain elements of many of these various approaches, depending on the context I was teaching in.

My own experience of teaching was to mirror, to some extent, the history of language teaching itself, marked by stumbling, experimental episodes, periods of confidence, with a return to further stumbling, exploratory searches for better approaches and methods. The wide range of teaching methodologies that have been developed in the past century have included highly structured approaches such as **Audio-Lingualism** (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), as well as a host of methods falling under the umbrella of **Communicative Language Teaching** (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), including **Task-Based Language Teaching** (Ellis, 2003).

In recent years, however, some language teaching theorists and linguists have suggested that the era of methods is over. We are in a phase in the field that liberally borrows from the cornucopia of past and present methods but is informed by a set of best practices or principles that cut across many of them. In his book *Understanding Language Teaching* (2006), Kumaravadivelu presented 10 Macro-Strategies that underpin sound teaching practices from a variety of methodological assumptions:

- Maximize learning opportunities
- Facilitate negotiated interactions
- Minimize perceptual mismatches
- Activate intuitive heuristics
- Foster language awareness
- Contextualize linguistic input
- Integrate language skills
- Promote learner autonomy
- Ensure social relevance
- Raise cultural consciousness

All of these deserve further elaboration, but in the interest of space I will just elaborate on a few of these that might not seem so immediately transparent.

Facilitating negotiated interactions means ensuring exchanges where learners can engage and negotiate language with each other. The goal is for learners to move beyond their current level of competence through a process of modifying their language in the interaction with other learners until both parties fully understand each other in mutually satisfying ways.

Minimizing perceptual mismatches refers to seeking to bridge the gap between the teacher’s intentions, plans, and goals and the learner’s interpretations of those features. Good practices involve continually seeking out student impressions of lesson plans and guidelines and helping students to narrow the gap between the teacher’s intentions and approaches and the student’s interpretation of those intentions and approaches.

Activating intuitive heuristics is in reference to weaknesses in methodology that seek to explicitly analyze, explain, and instruct the whole of the language system beyond the elementary level, especially before students have a chance to meet and muddle through a practice in the language system. The complexity of the language system renders such an endeavor generally out of reach of the average learner. Results of such teaching have not been promising. A better alternative is to use a heuristic approach, which allows more time in the experience or practice in the structure of the language. Instead of starting with long lists of rules to explain or deduce from a few examples, it is better to immerse students in the language they are meeting and let them gradually discover the rules for themselves inductively, with teacher guidance as needed. Students should be immersed in a rich linguistic environment, with plenty of opportunities to create, play, explore, negotiate, and muddle their way through the language until they achieve mastery or something approaching it.

Of the strategies presented by Kumaravadivelu, two especially have stood out for me. As I progressed in my own teaching career (and as I engaged in skirmishes with languages like Japanese, Thai, or Vietnamese) I came to believe it is especially important to provide opportunities for *contextualization of linguistic input*. When students are learning grammar or lexis, they need access to text or audio materials as references. They also need opportunities to apply and experiment with new linguistic input in the four skills. Additionally, learner opportunities for discovery and experimentation with the language system, before delving into any analysis and explanation, strike me as especially important. I believe students learn more through osmosis and immersion than through examining reams of explanatory texts. Most likely this practice would fall under the rubric of activating intuitive heuristics. Another practice I find useful that might come

under this heading is the recycling and/or transformation of tasks. In the old *Present, Practice, Produce* method, and some other methods of teaching that are sometimes called Communicative, lessons are often taught as one-off activities. When I first became acquainted with this method, I focused on creating entertaining activities for learners, with numerous activities following one after the other in a short period of time. Of course, I would not argue that one should avoid creating engaging materials or that such materials do not have value if they are entertaining. The problem is sometimes one of emphasis and opportunity cost. With the PPP style of teaching, there are fewer opportunities to go in-depth into the four skills and to reflect on learning. Recycling of an activity, however (as in TBLT), after the teacher and the class have examined what has been learned in the first cycle and exploring what (and how much) new grammar and lexis can be introduced again, allows the teacher and learners to bridge the gap between their respective levels of knowledge. Most importantly, it allows learners opportunities

to notice how they have progressed from the first cycle of the task to the last cycle. Transformations of tasks (such as first having students write a newspaper article on a theme, then turn it into a role play) allow for similar possibilities to witness acquisition of new language. Delving this deeply into the task, however, involves negotiation with the program, one's colleagues and supervisors, and the institution one teaches for, and is unfortunately not always possible given these various constraints. Admittedly in my own teaching practice, it is also very much a work in progress, and I cannot claim that I am always able to pull it off to a degree I find fully satisfactory.

Arguably, the few points I have outlined above are simply elements of *Task-Based Language Teaching*. Some would say that TBLT is more of an approach than a method (an approach being broader in practices and principles than a method). If we follow this line of thinking, then it is not that we have entered a new era; it is just that our definition of TBLT needs to more liberally embrace the strategies outlined above.

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