
Original Paper

A Search for the Best Language Teaching Method: A Wild Goose Chase or an Achievable Dream?

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Abstract

The paper interrogated the debate on the search for the best method in teaching language. It clarified the confusion between an approach and a method by establishing that an approach gives birth to a method, though a number of educationists use them interchangeably. It went on to give a synopsis of the many methods ranging from the traditional Grammar Translation Method to controversial ones such as suggestopedia, as well as whole-language teaching, task-based language teaching, communicative approach and eclecticism. It went further to analyse the topical no-method approach, leading to the conclusion that this debate is generally ill-focused because the actual target should be the teacher who has the autonomy to merely facilitate the interaction of the pupils with the whole language web, that is, exposure to the language, overseen by an innovative teacher.

Keywords: suggestopedia, communicative approach, language web, artistic teaching, eclecticism

Introduction

Over the years, the debate on the best method of teaching language in general, and second language teaching in particular, has thrived unabated (Quing-xue and Jin-fang, 2007). Traditional methods have been challenged by more modern child-centred approaches. The “post-modern” (normally referred to as post-method) linguists still remain ungratified because they maintain that different contexts dictate different approaches (ibid). So the prescriptive nature underlying the whole debate has the potential to compartmentalise, to confine the language instructor into a linguistic gaol. However, in an attempt to cure this noisome linguistic ‘pestilence’, some language experts came up with the idea of eclecticism where the ‘wise’ language teacher chooses the best out of each of the many methods (Mellow, 2002). Such a move was promising since it appeared to be shifting from focusing on method or approach to the instructor himself who had to use his discretion to apply relevant aspects of different methods. Most interesting is what comes after eclecticism, that is, rejection of any method arguing that eclecticism itself becomes a ‘method’ on its own, defeating the whole purpose of bringing to an end the ‘method’ controversy (Prabhu, 1990). We will, therefore, pursue these and other cognate arguments in this paper.

Demarcating parameters

But first, we need to demarcate the parameters of ‘method’, ‘approach’ and ‘teaching.’ Brubacher (1962) gives a broad conception of what general teaching methods entail. He rightly describes that “what the school attempts to do (by refining teaching methods) is to control the conditions of experience that the important lessons will be learnt in the most economical and effective way” (p135). But what exactly is a method? The language teaching website www.org/method_and_approach does not give a clear distinction between method and approach either, albeit acknowledging that an approach is a theory and, therefore, broader than a method which is narrower and more specific. So “the terms method and approach overlap when ‘method’ becomes too broad or ‘approach’ too narrow.” Therefore, since approach is the universal set and method the subset of the same, to put it mathematically, we will deliberately and conveniently use the two terms interchangeably.

Next, we look at the concept of teaching which heavily informs the method. Brubacher (1962) makes a very pertinent observation that education implies teaching and teaching implies knowledge. So the

process of teaching entails educating pupils. The abstraction remains, though, if the concept of education remains vague. Ipso facto, Keddie (in Jenks, 1977) describes education as the transaction of knowledge in the classroom. This implies that it is a multi-directional flow of information, some kind of academic intercourse between the teacher and the pupils and among pupils themselves. Ergo, the teacher comes out of the language class richer, not only in teaching experience, but also in the knowledge of what (s)he was trying to teach. If a language teacher holds a view as this, (s)he is likely to use a language teaching 'method' that conforms to this school of thought.

However, the million dollar question is whether the chosen method will be the most economical and effective one. If so, how then do we measure the economy and efficiency of the said method given the dismal failure of examinations to achieve these ends over the years? Robson (1974:19) graphically, albeit hyperbolically, puts it thus: "...the fierce competition engendered by marks, positioning, internal exams, external exams and streaming should be finished with, for the competitive system is bound to create children who experience themselves as failures." So until such a time when we find a better way of evaluating a method besides the 'flawed' examination system, the whole debate on the best method remains academic masturbation, a futile exercise which is doomed to fail.

Wanted: The Best Language Teaching Method!

The different teaching methods and approaches over the years have had their advocates and critics alike. The language website www.org/method_and_approach clearly describes the traditional methods of teaching language by categorically stating that "some schools of methodology such as audio-lingual method, natural approach, suggestopedia and total physical response see the teacher as the language model and commander of the classroom activities..." The early critics of these orthodox approaches had no kind words for them. Abbs (1969) indicts the teachers who purport to be qualified in the art of guiding and informing under these circumstances as responsible for creating an environment of suppression and monotony. He finally concludes that "we need to destroy the old bad methods of passive instruction. The people sitting at a desk, writing the facts that are dictated by the teacher, has nothing to do with life. It is the most efficient way of killing the mind of the child" (p19). Consequently, the poor child who is commandeered by the 'traditional' language teacher does not come out of the language class empowered in any way but is transmogrified from an active child to a passive adult who knows nothing more than complying with the status quo.

Conversely, the new approaches put the pupil at the centre of the teaching-learning experience and the teacher as merely a background facilitator and classroom colleague to the learners. Such methods would include, inter alia, the communicative approach and cooperative language learning. The current methods obtaining in our schools today are heavily informed by the communicative approach, hence the need to look at it in a little more detail. Rigg (1999) outlines the five-fold assumptions of the communicative approach namely (a) learners learn the language through using it in communication, (b) authentic and meaningful communication should be the goal of classroom activities, (c) fluency is an important dimension of communication, (d) communication involves the integration of different language skills, and (e) learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error. The pin-offs of this approach are the natural approach, cooperative language learning, content-based teaching and task-based teaching. So teaching the language through complete discourse like literary texts became very popular, and, it seems, fairly efficient.

However, linguists still feel that as long as we still talk about an approach, there is a likelihood of more approaches and methods being propounded. Therefore, some linguists expressed their disappointment with this monotonous linguistic debate that they felt the need to put an end to it as the closure of the century approached. Prabhu (1987) summarises this sentiment by asserting that "no single method can be suitable to varied teaching conditions or ... teachers in any educational system are varied in their abilities ... the quality of teaching in any classroom is dependent on the teacher's pedagogic perception." Having established this seemingly revolutionary position, Prabhu (1987) goes on to propose two pathways to bring to an 'end' to the methods debate namely the English language specialism and eclecticism. Whether he was hammering in the last nail in the 'methods' coffin or creating more controversy is what we intend to explore.

English language specialism is a matter of identifying, developing and articulating particular

perceptions of teaching and learning on the one hand, and seeking ways in which perceptions can be shared and sharpened through professional debate in the teaching community on the other. “What procedures a teacher follows in the classroom depends on what perceptions he or she sees most plausibility in, and the impact of any perception on classrooms depends on its ability to invoke corroborative institutions in the teaching community” (Prabhu, 1987:107). What is interesting here is the central role of the teacher. When the teacher is given such prominence, he is an artist, not a scientist. Gage (in Reed and Bergemann, 1995:15) describes artistic teaching as follows:

As a practical art, teaching must be recognised as a process that calls for intuition, creativity, improvisation, and expressiveness – a process that leaves room for departures from what is implied by rules, formulas and algorithms.... No-one can ever prescribe successfully all the twists and turns to be taken as the lecturer, the discussion leader, or the classroom teacher uses judgement, sudden insight, sensitivity and agility to promote learning.

Probably this brings us to the age-old debate of whether teachers are born or trained. A ‘trained’ teacher who has been armed with a bag of tricks may never be able to engage English language specialism. However, the artistic and/or reflective teacher can achieve this, provided that (s)he has had basic linguistic training to help him in his reflections.

Closely related to specialism is what Prabhu (1987) calls eclecticism. Equally revolutionary, this combination of methods, making use of the best of each of the methods, was received with a lot of enthusiasm and optimism. At last the teacher had freed himself from the shackles of methods imposed upon him by the so-called curriculum developers. It is based on four concepts namely, (a) eclecticism as a matter of operating with a combination of perceptions which, though all different, nevertheless found a satisfying balance in the round of an individual, (b) an exercise of worldly wisdom, that is, a search for the safest course in the midst of many risks, (c) a desirable principle of life, that is, a refusal to see things in terms of irreconcilable alternatives and a belief that, when there are alternative courses of action available, the right course must be chosen, and (d) the development of a new perception which enables one to see earlier perception in the new light, thus resolving what was earlier seen as conflict (Prabhu, 1987:108). However, the euphoria that came with eclecticism was short lived. After careful consideration, it was observed that taking the best of each method still retained heavy dependence on the ‘methods’. What it means is that the teacher still has to consult his many bags of tricks to look for the suitable method and the techniques thereof. Besides, it basically means that eclecticism also joins the list of methods as a combination of all methods. Teachers felt duped once again! Could language teachers ever find the ‘best’ method or totally free themselves from this perpetual and seemingly unending search? It remained to be seen.

The post-method linguists came up with what they called the no-best-method approach. This is an attempt to totally annihilate the method debate once and for all. Bartolome (1994, in Larsen-Freeman, 1999) vehemently asserts that the search for the best method of teaching language is ill-advised. Similarly, Prabhu (1990) is the chief proponent of this school of thought. He explains that there are three reasons why there might be no best method. Different methods are best for different contexts; all teaching methods are partially true or valid; and the notion of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ method itself is misguided. However, this stance was not without its prompt critics. Pessimists labelled it a convenient device for legitimising non-resolution of methodological issues. The proponents were often accused of academic cowardice which led them to withdraw into their cocoons of the ‘no-method-stance’. Furthermore, they were oft indicted of casualising language teaching, thus giving room for haphazard teaching resulting in incidental and accidental learning at its best. However, this paper vehemently argues that the obsession with order and protocol reflects the oppressive artificial bureaucratic society whereas effective learning should occur naturally though not haphazardly and accidentally as the pessimists would allege.

Similarly, Richards (in Prabhu, 1990) rightly argues for the no-method stance highlighting that the important issues are not about which method to adopt but how to develop procedures and instructional activities that will enable programme objectives to be attained. So a method which results from these procedures by coincidence becomes the best. In a nutshell, Richards sees the teacher as conscious of his content and he should be innovative enough to come up with the procedures or methodology he intends

to follow. Any method which results is purely coincidental and, therefore, not important. Prabhu summarises the advantage of this stance when he posits that “avoiding adherence to a single method has a certain ideological aura to it. It suggests liberation from a monolithic mould, a refusal to be doctrinaire, an espousal of plurality” (p136). Again, this is justifiable because no method is capable of catering for every context.

Moreover, the notion of good or bad itself remains by and large out rightly misguided. Besides the relativity of the notion, the measurement thereof remains questionable. If the learning outcome should be considered as the measure of goodness or otherwise of a method, how are these outcomes going to be measured? Brumfit (in Abbs, 1969) strongly questions the current examination system world-over. Equally concerned is Abbs (1969:143) who proposes that “...as soon as universities give up examination qualifications as their means of selecting sixth formers and ask for work to be submitted and teachers’ individual reports, the mystique of passing examinations will end.” The Zimbabwean examination system is no exception. Its central body, ZIMSEC, sets examinations that cannot be used as standard measures of competence which can be traced back to the classroom language teaching method used. Probably, if the examinations were going to be decentralised, say to cluster (district) level, at least they could be more reflective of the methods used because the teachers who have used the said methods were the ones who set the examinations which accurately assess the effectiveness of the methods they used basing on pupil output.

Finally, Bardovi-Harling and Hartford (1997) rightly agree that making decisions about methods must be made from a base of knowledge of language. This means linguists’ efforts should not be on looking for the best method of teaching language, but on nurturing a reflective teacher whose knowledge of linguistic theory should help him teach the language effectively. This makes Richards’ 1984 view of a reflective teacher as one who knows what he wants to teach, the needs of his pupils and the prevailing environment sound. The onus is, therefore, left on the teachers to design appropriate procedures to enable what Keddie (1978) calls ‘the transaction of knowledge’ in the classroom. If this comes out as a particular method, then it is purely coincidental.

Conclusion

Consequently, this brings us to complete homology with Prabhu’s no-method stance based on assumptions that different methods suit different contexts, all methods are partially valid and the very notion of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ are misplaced. So, like Fraser (in Lugton, 1970:3) who quotes Chomsky arguing that “...it is the language teacher himself who must validate or refute any specific proposal,” this paper totally subscribes to Prabhu’s 1990 view that there is no best method in teaching language but rather there is the best teacher who is a motivated, reflective professional whose “knowledge of language is key to interpreting crucial claims made by various methods regarding the ‘best’ or most ‘efficient’ means of teaching language” (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1997:xi). Therefore, instead of hunting for or inventing the best method to teach language, we would rather exhaust ourselves searching for best methods to educate language teachers so as to come up with an artistic, creative instructor and facilitator in the language “laboratory” who merely creates opportunities for pupils to interact with the target language, to experiment with its syntax and to create its discourse with the assurance that anyhow, the result is learning.

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