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Teaching Innovation in Language Pedagogy: Going Beyond the Methods and the Myths

*Dr. Ricardo Roque Mateos
University of Cádiz, Spain

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Corresponding Author*Dr. Ricardo Roque Mateos****Abstract**

Language Pedagogy has always been characterized by a dichotomy between the benefits of innovation, and the academic safety of trying to emulate the results achieved in the past by following known methods and proven theories. Although both currents are equally necessary for a positive progress within the field, adhering to a method beforehand might result in a lack of dynamism, as well as in a loss of valuable opportunities to further the results of the students and to maximize performance in the main factors that influence the learning process: time management, content validity and knowledge assimilation. It is clearly arguable that other variables also play a valid role within the pedagogical process; however the fact that time is a limitation in any human activity, the necessity for useful and updated contents, or the desirability for a successful acquisition of knowledge are three points that should be beyond contestation.

*Copy Right, IJAR, 2015,. All rights reserved***INTRODUCTION**

Although in the last decades we have seen many innovative ideas in the field of Language Pedagogy, most of them have appeared as a result of initiatives that have deliberately or inadvertently worked inside a framework that places the method as the main element in the equation (Braun et al., 2006). This focus has weighed on the design and the implementation of academic projects, especially regarding course distribution and the management of materials. As a result, we encounter numerous institutions where the adherence to a method or textbook is considered a basic tenet of a proper course design. Clearly explained by Hong and Pawan (2014:98-100), in some universities it becomes impossible to circumvent the idea that adhering to a single method or textbook grants some sort of extra structural advantage preventing a university course from falling into an imaginary chaos that would ensue the moment a lecturer deviates from a certain material or publication. The proposed reason for this preconception is, as in other cases, the contamination from scientific subjects in the planning and execution of university policies. The examples to draw this connection are many and varied, but perhaps Zelditch et al. (2014:ix) offers an overall explanation to this phenomenon, by pointing out how comfortable, and almost essential, it is to have a textbook when they are explaining equations in Geometric Morphometry regarding Biological models. The interesting point of that work is that the authors themselves are the ones stating the need for their own textbook in their university classes. In other words, the authors of that book need their own book to not forget some important information and leave it untaught. They use it for examples as well, which is also an interesting point to consider in depth.

Although we can all comprehend that a university needs common policies and guidelines to work properly and effectively, when those elements are created and carried out without paying attention to the particular needs of certain subjects like Language Pedagogy or Foreign Languages, the resulting situation might compromise the effectiveness of said subjects, thus, causing a handicap in the whole cognitive process for teachers and students. It is close to impossible for a language teacher to forget examples of a certain tense or being incapable of answering

basic questions about the issues that he addresses in his lecture. As explained by Bräuer (2001), a language specialist teaching at a university has a wide range of tools and knowledge to face any challenge that might be appearing throughout the sessions. It is, therefore, clear that the guidelines for course design in Humanities and Sciences should pay attention to the singularities of each subject, but in the case of Language Pedagogy, it is a need of the field itself. The detachment from the textbook and the method, understood as a rigid set of guidelines to carry out the teaching process, does not automatically take us to trust blindly in the almighty abilities of the language teacher; on the contrary, it drives us to a mindset of exploration of different textbooks, materials and theories that can complement each other and further the teaching process.

Material and Methods

It is highly beneficial to take a look at the materials being used by the two main global entities in Language Pedagogy nowadays. First of all, we have the Defense Language Institute from the United States. It might come as a surprise or even as an unknown organization, but the truth is that they have played a capital role in the development of one of the four main pillars of language acquisition: The Audiolingual Method, also known as The Army Method. We can see a concise, yet clarifying explanation of its origins in Flowerdew and Miller (2005). This method appeared influenced by the requirements of the Second World War for qualified speakers of foreign languages, infiltrated spies, interpreters etc. From day one, it had a practical need for effectiveness, and far from having been relegated to a relic of WW2, the United States has kept improving it year after year attracting highly qualified academics, refining the examination procedures and constantly developing new materials for the teaching process. Although it would be hard to determine the level of academic excellence of this institution compared to others, the interesting point to focus on should be the historical importance and the progression it has gone through.

In the beginning it was also limited to a single textbook by class and it kept the principles of the Audiolingual approach as something rigid (de Boot et al. 2005), but as time went by, the experience of countless groups of students with different goals and time limitations increased the development of textbooks, audio files, flashcards, cultural activities and whatever material could benefit the teaching process to make it more effective. Far from wanting this article to become a long and tedious explanation, I would just like to point out how even a rigid military institution has found that the right way to go is mixing different materials to adapt better to the teaching requirements of different groups of students, or to increase the focus on certain areas that may vary depending on time limitations. It is clearly not the same to have a group with an optional language class once per week than to have a group with four hours of classes every day, something that Richardson (1983) deconstructed fairly well, and that should make us think, as he does, that the correct material for one group could be totally overwhelming for another, or not enough to cover specific requirements of their future duties or examinations.

The other great pillar of Language Pedagogy, that I would like to mention due to its relevance, is the Direct Method. It is well known to the language teaching community, but it is always interesting to remember the progression of this method, in order to see how, given sufficient time, even the most rigid method can achieve balance and move towards the sphere of common sense and efficiency.

The history of this method begins as a response to the traditional systems of grammar and translation that were used for Latin and Greek. Fasold and Connor-Linton (2006) explain quite adequately how students grew tired of the poor results that were derived from applying classical structures of dead languages to those that were still alive and needed to be spoken, and how new concepts in education began to influence the field of language pedagogy. It would be quite long to explain the full implications of this leap forward, so it is better to point you towards the works of Stuart (1927), a publication that despite being old, has the correct take and the insightful approach required to untangle the different versions about the creation of this method. A good summary derived from that book would be that the Direct Method is based on German concepts assimilated by French teachers that had a few years of advantage in the whole matter, until one of them went to the United States and began teaching in a language school and later on developed a business with better results than classical schools or courses to learn languages. The surname of the man was Berlitz and the company bearing his name is still functioning nowadays, although with important changes and modifications, which are mostly unimportant to language specialists except for a couple of them analyzed in Lewis (1998), mostly connected with the fact that the theory about the Direct Method was wrong from the very beginning and it was presented to the public as such in order to create a powerful commercial advantage that would shock and get the interest of potential students in the USA and later worldwide.

The general description of the Direct Method includes several points that are usually taken as facts, disregarding the effect of the Berlitz schools being a business with a strong marketing plan behind. Briefly speaking, the idea that monolingual activities and conversation has been the base of this method is, and has always been wrong. To sustain this claim, I refer you to Sauveur (1887), a historical treasure showing that one of the key figures in the development of the Direct Method was using a bilingual approach as well as grammar explanations and exercises, the three basic points that are usually quoted to describe this method. The publications using bilingual structures, grammar and exercises were common in Berlitz as well, despite the message to the public being the exact opposite (Lewis op. cit.). That message has plagued the conception of the original methodology since the beginning. But even if we ignored the proof that the early authors of the Direct Method were businessmen more than academics, we would have to accept that the progression towards bilingualism, regular exercises and grammar explanations is noticeable in more recent publications like Berlitz Publishing (2011) or Berlitz Publishing (2012).

I mentioned before the four pillars of Language Teaching Methodology. The Classical Method of grammar and translation gave way to the Direct Method which influenced a refined and more effective version of it for WW2 called the Audiolingual Method and at the end of the 20th century we see the appearance of the Communicative Approach, giving more importance to freedom of communication and spontaneous exchange between students and teachers. The theory, as we have seen, hasn't been true from the very beginning of these methods, but if we consider that Audiolingual institutions nowadays are using a mixture of methodology (Long and Doughty, 2011), that the Direct Method has always mixed elements from other methods and theories, and that mostly all the new additions happening nowadays are either from the Communicative Approach or an adaptation trying to fulfill some framework (Deighton 1971:23-26), we can safely assume that the traditional classification is insufficient and unreal, as well as inaccurate in order to determine a pre-established method to be followed or to design a course untainted by external elements from other methods.

Result and Discussion

The alternative to the four main methods (plus the framework approach) wouldn't mean to fall into chaos and pedagogical uncertainty. The alternative, as it was masterfully stated by authors like Ellis (2012) or even Kumaradivelu (2006), goes along the lines of focusing on the skills the students must master, using a wide collection of works specialized in reading, grammar, vocabulary, idioms etc. It is statistically unlikely that one book has everything that is needed for a university course in a subject as wide and extensive as a foreign language. The more advanced a level is, the more books and resources we will need to use, in order to help our students reach their full potential and maximize the limited time available to do so. Failing to realize this essential approach to modern language teaching, would mean to lose effectiveness and fall short in a task that is both a privilege and a huge responsibility. To open the doors of a new language and a new culture so that all our students can benefit from the life experience that becomes available to them is a wonderful endeavor that should be accomplished with as much help as possible, from as many methods, programs, sources and textbooks as necessary.

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