

Revisiting Natural Approach and Communicative Language Teaching: A Reflection through Richards and Rodgers' Model of Method

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Abstract

This paper presents a perspective from which to reconsider one's teaching practice by revisiting two recognised second language teaching practices—Natural Approach and Communicative Language Teaching—against Richards and Rodgers' model of method. The paper describes the basic parameters of a method in the context of theoretical underpinnings of second language acquisition. In the event, the paper shows that a conceptual reflection can illuminate a range of subtle differences between different practices, thereby providing a vantage point from which to review one's own teaching practice.

Keywords : *language pedagogy, method, second language acquisition theories, natural approach, communicative language teaching*

キーワード : 言語教授法, メソッド, 第二言語習得理論, ナチュラル・アプローチ, CLT

1. Introduction

A choice of teaching method is imperative in any language learning and teaching context. Whilst the choice is an irresistibly arbitrary one, an understanding of key constructs of language pedagogy provides a useful toolbox for the language teacher to chart the course of his or her action in the classroom. The aim of this paper is to present a perspective from which to revisit, analyse, and inform one's teaching practice in the classroom. The paper first deals with the relationship between theories of language (i.e., approach)

and a given teaching practice. It then goes on to consider the parameters of a method in terms of Richards and Rodgers' (2001) model. Against this model as an analytic framework, the paper considers the parameters as well as subtle differences of two recognised interactive-type practices Natural Approach (NA) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

2. On approach: Theories of language and their implications for the practice

A language teaching practice is informed by one of three theoretical views or understandings of the ontological status of language. The structural view of language

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sees language as a system of phonological, grammatical, and lexical elements (hence called “structural”) for coding and decoding the intended communicative message of a speaker. The presence of a linguistic structure is presumed in this particular theoretical view. An outcome of language learning thus can be enhanced by addressing the acquisition of these structural elements of language. The functional view sees language as a vehicle to accomplish a certain function, and produce an intended outcome. The structures of language ought to be analysed and understood in relation to the functions that they carry out. While the focus is placed upon the function of language, the understanding of function is linked with the structural elements of language. The interactional view sees language as a primary site of communicative interaction in which meanings are negotiated and interpersonal relations are pursued for performing social transactions among individuals. These different theoretical perspectives of language translate into the differences in the approach to language learning and teaching (Table 1).

Table 1: Taxonomy of language teaching practices

Theoretical views	Methods
Structural	Grammar-translation Audio-lingual
Functional	The oral approach Directed practice
Interactional	The direct method Communicative language teaching Immersion language teaching Natural approach Silent way Suggestopedia Total physical response

Note: This is not an exhaustive list of recognised practices.

3. Theorising “method” : The inception

In the field of languages education, teaching has traditionally been conceived in terms of method, and a range of terms and concepts are used to describe recognised language teaching methods. These terms include, but are not limited to, approach, method, design, and procedure. In response to the need for clarity of these terms, Anthony (1963) proposed a conceptual framework to describe language teaching methods. In his framework, he elaborated the relationships among approaches, methods, and techniques. An approach is a set of assumptions about the nature of the language and language learning, although this construct does not dictate the way in which these assumptions ought to translate into the actual teaching setting. Following from these assumptions is a method which is consistent with the selected approach, and provides an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material. The final construct technique refers to the actual instantiation of the method as observed in the classroom. However, this model was criticised for its lack of substantial difference

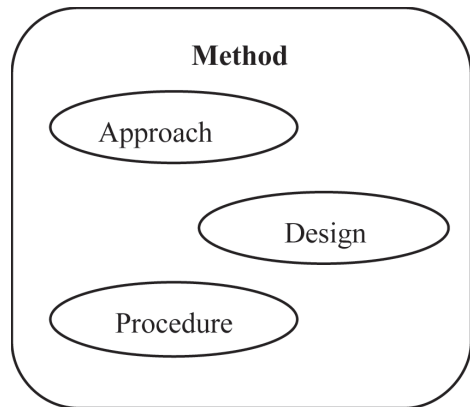


Figure 1: Schema of a method and its constitutive constructs

among approach, method, and technique. The model does not pay "sufficient attention to the nature of a method itself" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 20).

Richards and Rodgers (2001) drew on and extended Anthony's (1963) framework. In this extended model (Figure 1), a method represents a higher-order construct that encompasses approach, design, and procedure. Whilst there is not any significant change in the construct of approach, the constructs method and technique were modified and renamed design and procedure, respectively. An approach thus refers to "theories about the nature of language and language learning that serve as the source of practices and principles in language teaching" in this later model, too (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 20).

One of the other two constructs of the method is design. The construct design involves a consideration of the connection between theory and practice. At this level, the primary concern is placed on but not limited to the following elements: the objectives of a method, the selection of language material, the order of presenting this material; the types of learning tasks set for learners, the roles of learners and teachers, and the role of instructional materials (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Such design features translate into actual learning and teaching processes as observed in the classroom where language learning and teaching take place (Rodgers, 2001). Whilst the focus of a method is thus mediated by a particular approach taken, the specific objective of the method becomes instantiated in the flow of design parameters (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

The last construct procedure "encompasses actual moment-to-moment techniques, practices and behaviours that operate in teaching a language according to a particular method" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 31). Namely, procedure represents a range of learning and teaching processes one actually witnesses in the classroom, whereby a given method reveals its approach and design. At the level of procedure, there are three focal dimensions (Richards & Rodgers, 2001): the use of teaching activities, the ways in which particular teaching activities are used for practicing language content, and the procedures and techniques used in giving feedback to learners concerning the form and/or content of their utterances and/or sentences.

4. Natural approach and communicative language teaching

The paper now turns to a consideration of the parameters of two recognised teaching methods NA and CLT, both of which hold their primacy upon the interactive nature of language. At the level of approach, NA holds that language inherently is a vehicle for communication of messages with a prime focus on meaning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Whilst language is viewed as a system of structural elements, decreased emphasis on conscious grammar is a feature of this practice. One of the inventors of this practice, Steven Krashen, is a second language acquisition (SLA) theorist. A number of his theories, which were originally proposed as hypotheses, underpin this practice. These theories are the acquisition-learning hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the

natural order hypothesis, the input hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis. These theories translate into the levels of design and procedure of this practice. At the level of design, while the goal of NA is set at an intermediate proficiency level (Hadley, 2001), Krashen himself states that “the goals of the course are ‘semantic’” (Krashen, 1995, p. 138). According to Krashen and Terrell,

They [learners] need not know every word in a particular semantic domain, nor is it necessary that the syntax and vocabulary be flawless—but their production does need to be understood. They should be able to make the meaning clear but not necessarily be accurate in all details of grammar (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

The objective of NA reflects the basic tenet of the input hypothesis. That is, acquisition occurs by receiving a comprehensible input. At the level of content and its organisation, NA is fundamentally “designed to develop basic communication skills—both oral and written” and “the goals ... are based on an assessment of student needs” (Krashen & Terrell as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 135). As a corollary, any list of topics and situations could suggest rather than specify meaning-making syllabus contents (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). The feature of learning and teaching activities is characterised as presenting comprehensible input, using concrete cues for comprehension of the input, minimising learner anxiety, and maximising learner self-confidence (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). The instantiation of this feature is informed by the input and affective filter

hypotheses. Thus the role of the acquirer is assumed as “a processor of comprehensible input” (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 137). The teacher’s role is construed as a primary source of comprehensible input in the target language, and he or she is required to generate a continuous production of language input. It follows that the use of NA demands the teacher of a central, active role in the classroom. In this respect, the role of the teacher is construed as actor and/or props user, while that of the learner guesser and/or immersee (Rodgers, 2001).

In line with this teacher’s role, the intended function of materials is to enhance meaningful activities in the classroom by providing “the extralinguistic context that helps the acquirer to understand and thereby to acquire” (Krashen & Terrell, 1983 as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986). The preferred forms of language material may include elements of realia rather than those of a textbook. Certain types of materials, such as visual aids, adverts, product brochures, transport schedules, and maps might also be recommended. All these forms of material work to elicit a transfer of meaning between the learners, thereby promote the learner’s comprehension and communication, and result in a facilitation of language acquisition. Games in particular are regarded as a useful resource of classroom activities: “games by nature, focus the student on what it is they’re doing and use the language as a tool for reaching the goal rather than as a goal itself” (Terrell, 1982 as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

It is notable that a range of teaching

and learning activities employed in NA are compatible with those of other methods such as Situational Language Teaching and CLT (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). As suggested by Krashen and Terrell (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986), the teacher could adopt NA eclectically with activities employed in Total Physical Response (TPR), such as introducing the key vocabulary sparingly, giving commands, and using role plays and slide presentations, while minimising error correction. Whatever the design and procedure features may be, however, the role of the teacher overall is required to meet the conditions as Krashen's language acquisition theories presuppose.

CLT was invented from the observation that while the learner may have the knowledge of the conscious grammar of language, he or she may be unable to function within a real-world context (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). At the level of approach, CLT holds that language is a system for the expression of meanings rather than a system of abstract grammatical rules (Nunan, 1999). This view parallels the approach taken in NA. Accordingly, even if the learner makes an error in the classroom, the error is tolerated and seen as a natural outcome of the learner's communicative development. The teacher may rephrase an incorrect sentence produced by the learner into an acceptable form instead of correcting in an explicit manner. Along this line of approach, classroom activities are considered to promote language learning best when they involve an authentic communication. As such, the activities informed by the principles of CLT involve carrying out meaningful tasks and using

language that is meaningful to the learner, among other things (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). At the level of design, unlike the case of NA, the principles of CLT presuppose a variety of needs of the learners, as suggested by Piepho (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986). For this very reason, objectives for the CLT classroom by nature cannot be specified beyond the scope of the needs of a particular group of learners themselves. As a corollary, learning and teaching activities in the classroom often vary and involve a negotiation of meaning and information-sharing by focusing on completing tasks such as games and role plays. The selection of activities depends on the needs of the learner, so does the content choice and its organisation. As Breen and Candlin suggest, the assumed role of the learner in CLT is, as opposed to that in NA, a "negotiator ... within the classroom activities procedure and activities" (as cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986). That is to say, the learner is expected to interact in an independent way so that successful communication is accomplished. In contrast, the role of the teacher can be diverse, but is different from that in NA. The teacher's role may range from a communication facilitator among class participants to even an independent participant, as well as to a researcher and learner (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Therefore the teacher is expected to encourage the learners to risk, participate in the communication among the learners, and supply structure or vocabulary as information new to or lacking in the learner, to name a few among other things. With reference to instructional materials, they are viewed as a way to increase the classroom interaction and language use, labelled as text-based,

task-based materials and realia (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). These materials may include textbooks, a variety of games, role plays, simulations and magazines, advertisements and newspapers, all of which aim to promote communication in the classroom. To reiterate the point, the procedure of the CLT method takes place as observed in the classroom, whereby the method reveals its approach and design. This ephemeral nature of CLT entails that “description of any typical classroom procedures used in a lesson based on CLT principles is not feasible” (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 80), nor any techniques and management procedures are exclusive to CLT, the respect of which is similar to NA.

5. Concluding remarks

Emergent from the above reflection is that both NA and CLT share quite a few principles in the approach, design, and procedure levels on the one hand. On the other, one distinctive feature between these two practices is notable at the approach level. While NA is undergirded by SLA theories, such rigorous theoretical underpinnings may seem to be lacking in the principles of CLT. Further distinctive features are discernible at the design level. While the teacher is expected to play a more active role in the classroom in line with the SLA theories in NA, expected in CLT is a mediating, facilitative role. The learner’s role corresponds to this difference. Whilst the learner is expected to acquire a language through comprehension of the input in NA, an eager participation through an exchange of meaningful information is anticipated in CLT.

Thus, revealed through Richards and Rodgers’ s model of method are subtle but

important differences between recognised language teaching practices which may otherwise be discerned as being quite similar. It is in this respect that Richards and Rodgers’ s model provides a vantage point from which to revisit and reconsider one’ s teaching practices.

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要 旨

本論は、Richards and Rodgers のメソッドの概念枠組みを通じた、ナチュラル・アプローチおよびCLTについての理論的文脈に基づく省察を報告する。メソッドの概念は普段の教育実践を振り返り、またそれに新たな視点をもたらすという意味で、有用な発見原理であることを論じる。

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