

# To what extent is English language teaching methodology informed by theory?

Cui Dan<sup>1</sup> and Xu Tian<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Harbin Engineering University, <sup>2</sup>Harbin Engineering University  
cuidan@hrbeu.edu.cn, xutian1005@hrbeu.edu.cn

## Abstract

With the globalization of the world, English language teaching becomes more important than ever before, and many universities and classroom teachers are active to explore the most efficient and effective methodology to teach English languages to achieve a desirable result. When they seek to improve the quality of English language teaching, they often research teaching methodologies by referring to general theories about language and language learning. Theoretical bases and teachers' hands-out experience have informed methodologies of ELT, and methods of English language teaching have been improved with the developments about linguistics, psychology and education. But there is a question which extent the information that theory has made available can be used to explore English language teaching methodology and the relevance of theory to English language teaching methodology.

## Keywords

Language Teaching Methodology, ELT, Theory, Relevance

## Introduction

Ellis (1997) explains that there has been very little consideration of how second language acquisition can be utilized in language teaching methodology, and Ellis (1991) also mentions that researchers do not apply their work to language teaching. In general, the theory that researchers have found out mainly focuses on how languages are learned, and how language itself is constructed. Researchers are concerned with areas of relevance to methodology, f Therefore, theory has nothing to tell teachers about what to teach but serves as a guide on how to teach. In contrast, teaching methodology is concerned with practical knowledge. Practitioners try to design the most effective way and procedure to teach

languages. Theory may or may not lead to an efficient methodology.

There is a gap between the theory and methodology. The crucial issue of the gap is the relationship between technical and practical knowledge. Ellis (1997, p.7) mentions 'that of the outsider-insiders for an applied linguist is not a practitioner of language pedagogy but rather someone who looks at language pedagogy from the vantage point of knowledge gleaned from technical source. It is clear that why some theories are questioned irrelevant to practice by practitioners and cannot inform methodology completely. According to Ellis (1994), technical knowledge does not supply specific directions and may not be considered to be of use in teaching methodology, especially in classroom activities. Therefore, 'the lack of connection between academic research and teachers' instruction cannot guarantee methodology (Lynch, 1996, p.xv).

But on the other hand, it cannot be assumed that theory has no function to practice. Theory plays an important role because it provides teachers with a theoretic basis for methodology in general. Theories about language offer a framework that may motivate a particular teaching method, such as Audiolingulism. Theories about learning underlie an approach or method about psycholinguistic processes involved in learning and conditions<sup>1</sup> needing to be met about the learning processes. (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, pp.16-19).

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is funded by the International Exchange Program of Harbin Engineering University for Innovation-oriented Talents Cultivation

## 1 Effect

The theory of instructed second language acquisition is based on whether it is helpful to solve the problem of teaching knowledge, for example teaching grammar effectively in the classroom context, and two primary distinctions between implicit and explicit language learning. Classroom language learning is different from the way in which language learning is obtained naturally; this needs teachers' instruction. Teachers make their effort to organise input into students. The activities and steps that teachers adopt in the classroom directly influence students' learning level. Therefore, teachers face the problem of how to design language teaching. From this point of view, the theory of instructed second language acquisition makes its research relating to solving the problem mainly on two aspects.

One is to improve students' ability to use the language instead of learning the knowledge of linguistics. For teachers, the purpose of instruction is to enhance students' ability of using the language. The other one is that the theory considers the form-focused instruction. Although this idea is not up-to-date, the form-focused instruction is vital for teachers to make learners progressive. (Ellis, 1997, pp.100-101)

## 2 Comparison

Theory is important for language teaching and can offer information to methodology. On the basis of proposals derived from the theory of second language acquisition and my own experience, I can find some useful methods to language teaching compared with my previous procedures.

I gained inspiration about grammar teaching. In my English teaching, I prefer to use the form-focused instruction when I teach grammar. I focus on the main points of grammar and follow the instruction in detail, from definition to conditions of using, to the paradigm of words, to sentence patterns and to questions to be noticed. All the relevant knowledge about a certain part of grammar is taught completely for one or two classes. After teaching, more exercises are given to do in the classroom to examine whether the grammar is mastered, and error corrections are given promptly. I use this teaching method especially for adult students. From the feedback of students, I know that they understand the knowledge about grammar in the classroom, and questions are produced consequently. The knowledge is easily forgotten and students do not grasp it fully by understanding. My teaching method is not compatible with the knowledge about principles of theories about

language and language teaching, although my students and I like the method.

Now, I have changed my mind, understood the process of learning, and learned how to teach explicit and implicit knowledge. Learners should be required to process the structure, not to produce it. The activities in tasks are followed to require first attention to meaning, then noticing the form and function of the grammatical structure, and finally error identification. I am also informed that comprehensive input is important and students should be provided with as much comprehensive input as possible.

## 3 Conclusion

In summary, theory can contribute to language teaching methodology. It provides theoretic bases for language and language learning, and also shows some implications to methodology. Language teaching cannot take place without a theory. But it must be clearly acknowledged for language teaching, as Ellis (1997) believes that theory does not constitute a body of knowledge that is necessary for the development of teaching methods. The language teaching methodology is informed not only by purely theoretical development, but also by the practical hands-on experience of classroom teachers. Efficient and effective teaching methods require teachers' practical experience on the basis of students' reaction and knowledge. Theory informs teaching methodology, but it cannot ensure competent practice, and Brumfit (ibid: 68) explains 'there is always the possibility that practice will run ahead of theory, as well as the reverse.'

## References

- Brumfit, C. (1983) 'The integration of theory and practice', in Alatis et al. (eds) in Ellis, R. *SLA Research and Language Teaching* Oxford University Press
- Ellis, R. (1991) *Second Language Acquisition and Language Pedagogy* Clevedon, Multilingual Matters Ltd
- Ellis, R. (1994) *The Study of Second Language Acquisition* Oxford University Press
- Ellis, R. (1997) *SLA Research and Language Teaching* Oxford University Press
- Lynch, T. (1996) *Communication in the Language Classroom* Oxford University Press
- Richards, J. and Rodgers, T. S. (1986) *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* Cambridge University Press