Let’s Agree to Disagree:
Controversies and Contradictions in Language Teaching

Timothy Taylor
Department of English Language Education
9th May 2015

The English you learned in school III

didn’t
Abstract

Why isn’t English teaching easier? We know so much about language, but helping students to learn English well continues to confront teachers with layers of difficult choices. To make it worse, much of the advice and training teachers receive is contradictory, confusing or even irrelevant to their teaching situation. Tradition suggests that spending time and effort to learn is the most important part of learning English well. But applied linguistics tells a different story. There are numerous factors that determine how well students learn a language or whether they learn at all. These factors include age, context, culture, practice and motivation. They constantly interact, making the learning scenarios endless. This talk will explore the ever-shifting controversies about how students learn English best. We’ll explore such issues as the role of grammar, the relevance of reading, the importance of IT, and whether “communicative language teaching” is a teaching fashion or a necessity. We’ll consider many sides of the debates and contradictions surrounding English teaching and try to find a way through the maze of alternatives.
# The English You Didn’t Learn in School - III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Seminar 1  | 11 April 2015  
"Eat your lunch slowly:" Cultural patterns of communication and language miscues  
( FULL )  | Dr. Paul Stapleton  |
|            | [ Abstract ] [Power point Presentation]  |                          |
| Seminar 2  | 18 April 2015  
A bit of Funology: Phonological issues at the level of the sentence  | Prof. David Coniam  |
|            | [ Abstract ] [Power point Presentation]  |                          |
| Seminar 3  | 25 April 2015  
Getting emotional in a second language: How that helps you learn  | Dr. Matt DeCoursey  |
|            | [ Abstract ] [ PPT 1; PPT 2 ]  |                          |
| Seminar 4  | 2 May 2015  
English data bank: How to use computers to assist English studies  | Dr. Wang Lixun  |
|            | [ Abstract ] [Power point Presentation]  |                          |
| Seminar 5  | 9 May 2015  
“Let’s agree to disagree:” Controversies and contradictions in language teaching  | Dr. Timothy Taylor  |
|            | [ Abstract ] [ Online Application ]  |                          |
Overview

Introduction
Language Learning: Complexity and Context
Competing Views of Language Learning
Towards a Consensus: Integrative Methods
Conclusion
Questions and Comments
Seventy teachers from the UK were sent to Shanghai to study classroom methods to investigate why Chinese students perform so well. Upon their return, the teachers reported that much of China’s success came from teaching methods the UK has been moving away from for the past 40 years.

The Chinese favour a “chalk and talk” approach, whereas countries such as the UK, US, Australia and New Zealand have been moving away from this direct form of teaching to a more collaborative form of learning where students take greater control.
Introduction
Introduction

I hate English. I want to be a hairdresser.

I love English songs and movies!

I want to be a financial analyst, so I must do well on my exams.

I want to be a social worker.

I like English, but English hates me.

I hate English. I want to be a hairdresser.

I like English, but English hates me.

I study English to please my parents.

I study English because... I have no choice.

My boyfriend doesn't like English.
Introduction

Repetition is the key to mastery. Familiarity is the pathway to excellent English.

Variety is the spice of life. Language learners thrive on cognitive diversity.

Context is important. That’s why past papers are so essential.

Encourage students to make mistakes; they will self-correct and learn more.

Correct mistakes as soon as they’re made, or they will become fossilized.

Context is important. That’s why language arts are so essential.

Context is important. That’s why text-type analysis is so essential.

Context is important. That’s why English can never be learned properly in a school setting.
In a nutshell

There are teaching and learning approaches that work well and others that don’t. *How* well an approach works depends on a complex set of contextual factors, often obscured by uncontrollable or irrelevant factors. Understanding the relevant factors to effective language learning is the objective of this talk.
The Complexity Factor

The Human Brain: To Communicate (etc.)
The Complexity Factor

The Large Hadron Collider: Create and Analyze Boson Particles

The Space Shuttle: Explore Space
The structure of an interrogative with an auxiliary verb

Ungrammatical questions with fronted main verbs (Swam John?) are blocked by auxiliary constraint on the fronted verb position. Since do has the auxiliary feature and does not add unwanted meaning, it is the only verb that can be chosen for inverted questions lacking any other auxiliary. Ungrammatical sentences with both a fronted and a medial auxiliary (Can he can go?) are blocked by the consistency requirement: all tokens of a given semantic predicate are given distinct indices in f-structure. In these double-auxiliary non-sentences there are two separate entries at the same level of f-structure and consistency is thus violated.

Of course, life is never that easy.
Education: The Progress of Our Understanding

• In **1900**, the number of people who understood Einstein’s special theory of relativity was: **0**

• In **1905**, the number of people who understood Einstein’s special theory of relativity was: **1**

• In **1919**, the number of people who understood Einstein’s special theory of relativity was: **3-10**

• In **2015**, the number of people who understand Einstein’s theory of relativity is: **10,000’s – 100’000’s**
American Classroom 1965
Papua New Guinea 1990
Hong Kong Classroom 2015
The Learning Curve
Universal Context Factors for Language Learning

How fast and how well language learning occurs includes several variables *that are often beyond a teacher’s control*, including age, culture, motivation and practice.
In this study, 67 adult English students were assessed, comparing their English mastery (after 5 years of study) to native speakers. Half of the group (33) began their studies before puberty, and half (34) began after puberty. The comparison of their English results with native speakers is shown in table.
Context Variable 2: Culture

Experts do not agree on exactly what culture is, but there is some consensus that it is very important in shaping our identity.

One way to think about culture is the *collective consciousness* of a group. Understanding that we participate simultaneously in multiple overlapping cultures, it helps to address such questions as:

- How prestigious/valued/important is this?
- To what extent should I conform?
- How close is this outside thing to my inside self?
- How meaningful is this?
Context Variable 3: Motivation

4 kinds of motivation:

**Intrinsic vs Extrinsic**
Motivation that originates from within oneself (intrinsic) or from outside sources (extrinsic). School life often encourages and reinforces the weaker form of motivation.

**Instrumental vs Integrative**
Motivation for a concrete, practical result (instrumental) or in order to incorporate new skills into personal, meaningful life goals.
Context Variable 4: Practice

The 10,000 hour rule

The idea of “practice makes perfect” has a scientific basis. Psychologists studying the concept of expertise have found a very consistent pattern. People who have mastered complex skills have almost always spent at least 10,000 hours practicing. (19-20 hours a week or 2.75 hours a day for 10 years).

Outliers by Malcolm Gladwell

https://youtu.be/XS5EsTc__2Q
The Learning Curve

linear relationship

"the learning curve"

10,000 hours
Competing Views of Language

How is language acquired?
What is language competence?
What is the ideal curriculum?
How can language be taught?
Why learn English at all?
Competing Theories of Language Acquisition

**Behaviorism** – Language is learned by imitation (Nurture)

**Innatism** – Language is instinctual (Nature)

**Interactionist** – Language is learned through interaction (Nature and Nurture)
Competing Views of Language Competence

If we agree that learning language is about developing competence... what *kind* of competence?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competence</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Linguistic competence</strong></td>
<td>Structure &amp; vocabulary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sociolinguistic competence</strong></td>
<td>How to use language appropriately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discourse competence</strong></td>
<td>Take part in conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pragmatic competence</strong></td>
<td>Develop strategies for understanding and being understood in real situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sociocultural competence</strong></td>
<td>Cultural assumptions and background knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment competence</strong></td>
<td>Perform well on <em>curriculum</em> assessments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Competing Curriculum Contexts

**Approaches to Learning**

1. **Analytical** (knowledge is acquired through division into parts and understanding the rules that govern)
2. **Experiential** (knowledge is acquired through thoughtful interaction with the topics that relate to it)
3. **Process** (understanding is demonstrated in a gradual, incremental, step-by-step approach)
4. **Product** (understanding is demonstrated by showcases a product that integrates the knowledge and skills learnt)

**Organization of Content**

1. **Structural** (e.g. grammatical items)
2. **Functional** (e.g. language content arranged in terms of functions or speech acts)
3. **Topic-based** (e.g. organized around themes, topics or other units of content)
4. **Tasked-based** (e.g. content of learning organized around real-world tasks)
The Local English Curriculum in HK

Figure 2.1 Diagrammatic Representation of the English Language Curriculum Framework

The English Language Curriculum provides learners with learning experiences to increase their language proficiency for study, work, leisure and personal enrichment; develop their knowledge, skills, values and attitudes; and promote lifelong learning so as to enhance their personal and intellectual development, cultural understanding and global competitiveness.

Strands

Strands highlight the major purposes for which English is learned in Hong Kong, and are used to organise learning content and activities for developing learners' knowledge (general and linguistic), skills (language, communication and learning how to learn), values and attitudes as a holistic process.

Nine Generic Skills

Interpersonal Knowledge Experience

Values and Attitudes

Flexible and diversified modes of curriculum planning

Effective learning, teaching and assessment

Overall Aims and Learning Targets of English Language

Figure 4.1 Approaches to Learning and Teaching

Learning as a "Product"

Learning as a "Process"

Learning as "Co-construction"

Teaching as "Co-construction"

Applying their knowledge and skills, learners work collaboratively to come up with a proposal of activities for the English Club.

- Learners make an oral presentation, giving a description of the proposed activities and providing reasons.
- Learners improve their proposal based on the feedback of their fellow classmates and the teacher.

Teaching as "Inquiry"

Learners analyze and interpret information, and engage in critical discussion in the process of completing the task:

- Learners express their views and share ideas based on the information collected.
- Learners decide on a list of activities to be held for the English Club next year.

Teaching as "Direct Instruction"

Through the teacher’s explanation and modelling, learners gain knowledge and understanding of the grammar and syntactic structures essential to the completion of the task:

- use of modal verbs
- idiomatic expressions for making suggestions
- use of topic sentences

Teaching as "Co-construction"
Language learning contradictions

1. Language learning is **bottom-up**
2. Language is learned by imitation: **repetition**
3. Language use is a **rule-governed system of symbols**
4. Language learning success can be measured by what someone knows
5. Language learners should be **autonomous**.

1. Language learning is **top-down**
2. Language is learned by instinct: **creation**
3. Language use is a **creative system of communication**
4. Language learning success can be measured by what someone does
5. Language learning is a **community** activity.
Language learning contradictions 1: Top-down vs Bottom-up

**Top-down** processing of language happens when someone uses background information to predict the meaning of language they are listening to or reading. Strategies include forming expectations from text type and the anticipation of meaning from title, headings, surrounding text and other context clues.

**Bottom up** processing relies on assembling meaning from the parts of the discourse, including the words, phrases, and/or discrete sounds.
Top-down (Holistic) vs Bottom Up (Atomistic): Audi TT
Top-down (Holistic) vs Bottom Up (Atomistic): Common Blackbird
Today class... we'll continue learning how to ride a bike!
Language learning contradictions 2: Repetition vs Creation

The influence of Grammar translation and Audio-lingual methods helped to create a culture of drilling, exercises and fill in the gaps.

Communicative language teaching attempts to provide gaps in meaning: space for learners to fill creatively with communicative interactions.
Language learning contradictions 2: Repetition vs Creation

https://youtu.be/DaYxIYA1wmw

https://youtu.be/EBM854BTGL0
Toward Consensus: Integrative Approaches

• Communicative Language Practice
• The Relevance of Reading
• Teaching Grammar in Context
• The Importance of IT
“The past decade(s) in language teaching have been those of growing concern with meaning. The importance of meaningful language use at all stages in the acquisition of second or foreign language communicative skills has come to be recognized by researchers and teachers around the world, and many curricular innovations have been developed in response.”

-- Savignon

“All this, of course, takes time and involves noise and movement and personal relations... and above all communication with one another: the vital thing so often cut off in a schoolroom.”

-- Ashton-Warner
The Relevance of Reading

Increased time and opportunities for voluntary, free reading in the target language contributes to increased vocabulary, familiarity with grammar patterns and overall comprehension.
The Role of Grammar

For the Linguist:
1. Universal Grammar
2. Theoretical Grammar
3. Mental Grammar
4. Transformational Grammar
5. Systemic-functional Grammar
6. Comparative Grammar
7. Reference Grammar
8. Traditional-Structural Grammar
9. Pedagogical Grammar
10. Performance Grammar

For the Language teacher:
Teach how language uses patterns to make meaning in context.
The Importance of IT

After reviewing over a thousand empirical studies of online learning, a report prepared for the US Department of Education found that students in online learning conditions - especially at the college level – performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction.

The report concluded that, especially among the older learners at the college undergraduate, graduate and professional studies levels, "Students who took all or part of their class online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional, face-to-face instruction."
“Success”

In 1999, I taught at a small international school in Tianjin, China. I taught English to grade 6 – 8 students who could not join English medium classes. The objective was to integrate them into normal subject classes as soon as possible. My students were from Korea, Hong Kong, Japan and Saudi Arabia. Of the twelve students I taught in the first year, all of them joined their grade level (grades 6 – 8) within one year. Therefore...
Guaranteed Success in English Teaching

1. Allow me to define “success”.
2. Allow me to choose my own students.
One focus...

Encouraging characteristics of the “good language learner”

The “good language learner”...

• ...is willing to make good guesses about meaning
• ...tries to communicate despite lack of appropriate language
• ...is willing to make mistakes
• ...looks for and thinks about patterns
• ...practices often
• ...is tolerant of ambiguity
• ...analyzes language
• ...enjoys language for its own sake
Suggestions for Teachers and Learners

• Involve students in setting language learning objectives
• Be clear and realistic about objectives: set very small targets at frequent intervals
• Include listening and reading for pleasure and meaning
• Arrange communicative practice with feedback
• Teach grammar as the habit of thinking about patterns of making meaning in context
Resources

*English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4-6) (CDC and HKEAA, 2007)*


*How Languages are Learned* by Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada (Oxford University Press, 2008)


*Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching* by Diane Larsen-Freeman (Oxford, 2000)

*The Language Instinct* by Steven Pinker (Harper Collins, 1994)

Questions and Comments are welcome!