A Reflection on Language Teaching Philosophy

Every modern language teacher, so long as he/she is not completely out of contact with colleagues in his/her field, will sooner or later be caught up in the perennial debate between two major frameworks, i.e. structure-based or communication/function-based teaching approach. Three years ago, when I was writing the statement of my teaching philosophy for my second year review, I still had the luxury not to identify myself with any particular school of teaching approach, as I was still a novice teacher — actually too inexperienced to have any fears, just like a first year philosophy student who believes that he has found that greatest philosophy ever. Back then I claimed that my approach was eclectic, somewhere in between of the two major frameworks. However, what is an eclectic approach any way? Is an eclectic approach possible? Am I saying that another three years of teaching only make me more doubtful about my daily classroom practices? If so, have I formed new teaching philosophy and style in place of the old ones? In this essay I am seeking to answer the above questions, and to take this opportunity sort out my thoughts about language teaching, which have been questioned, challenged and transformed on a daily basis.

In the last three years, attending classes and workshops at Teacher’s College, especially classes about SLA (second language acquisition), has provided me opportunities to access a wide range of SLA theories that address to various aspects of language learning. I consider myself well versed in SLA literature, becoming quite familiar with the latest “trends” such as FoF (Focus on Form) and TBLT (task based language teaching). At first, I was a little overwhelmed by the numerous new terminologies, but soon I found out that SLA research is a great source for any language teachers. And I was even inspired to conduct my own research on learner errors since 2005. My research started as an ardent interest in treatment of learner errors. I believe that in order to find the optimal treatment for learner errors, it is necessary to identify the types of errors, analyze sources of errors and record the course of development of different types of errors.

While my data analysis is still in progress and research results inconclusive, I have some interesting findings about teacher’s role that have contradicting my old beliefs. For example, I used to believe that a language teacher should always correct student’s errors on the spot and explicitly, because accuracy weights more than fluency. But my data has shown that while some errors can be easily corrected, others remain persistent despite instructional interference; certain type of errors will reduce as the levels of learner’s Chinese increases, irrelevant of the teacher’s efforts. In other words, teachers have limited control on students’ output after learning has occurred. I also observed that some errors are byproducts of instruction, such as overuse of a grammar form. Further readings in SLA research have confirmed that classroom instruction, if not carried out properly, can do more harm to than helping learning (On a side note, this is a disheartening fact because all teachers intend well for their students, but at the same this fact also imbued new significance to my job).

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So the question has become: “In what way can a teacher positively affect learners’ language acquisition?” To answer this question, I need to borrow VanPatten’s (1995) model which best captures the developmental stages and processes of language acquisition.

![Fig. 11.1 A model of second language acquisition and use (based on VanPatten 1995).](image)

First, it goes without saying that without input language learning can never occur. Teacher can play an very active role here by providing input of large quantity and excellent quality, especially in a foreign language learning environment while other forms of input (such as real communications in a native environment) are lacking. I have observed first hand that students who went through immersion summer program in China fare much better than those who attend regular Chinese classes at Columbia, even though the textbooks and the teaching approach are almost identical. So it must be the target language environment that provide extra opportunities for the learners to use the language, and more exposure to the authentic input in various forms. Foreign language teachers, without that advantage of the target language environment, have to make extra efforts to enhance the classroom input. They need to understand their students’ needs well and adapt their teaching materials to their own classes. For example, the teacher can adapt and supplement the textbook, and if necessary to change the sequence of chapters. Indeed, it is easy said than done. Following a textbook and a well-established syllabus is so much easier on the part of the teacher, but as teachers we should not only provide knowledge, we should also engage students, to provide them opportunities to learn, and to activate their prior knowledge. The focus on input is obviously in line with communicative language teaching approach.

Second, learner’s intake is derived from input but always less than input. For example, we all know that second language learners can understand more than they can actually use the TL (target language). Learners are heavily influenced by their NL (native language), and they tend to pick up the linguistic forms that are typologically close to their NL. Recent SLA literature has directed attention to the input process which accounts for how the intake happens. PI (Processing Instruction) is a pedagogical application of this strand of research. In a nutshell, PI allows teacher to manipulate learners’ processing of the input, and by so doing teachers may alter the course of development of learner’s IL (interlanguage) system. Traditional grammar instruction and drill, in contrast, do little at this level of processes, and therefore only have minimal effect on the developing system. The pedagogical inference of PI, in my opinion, is that teachers should and can direct students’ attention directly to linguistic forms, which are dismissed by traditional communicative language teaching approach. Although PI is focused on linguistic forms, it does

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not fall into the framework of structure-based language teaching. It is rather a supplement to the communicative language teaching approach.

Third, regarding output, even though many researchers argue that teachers cannot alter the developing system and change the way learners access, control and monitor their developing system, I still believe that traditional structure-based language teaching techniques can play a positive role here. Chinese is more typologically distant from English than other European languages, and a certain amount of repetition and drilling are necessary to automate the correct form in output. This idea dovetails with traditional Chinese educational philosophy that meaning of words will emerge if one repeat them hundreds of times. That’s probably why structure-based language teaching philosophy dominates and dictates Chinese teaching.

I think I have always been trying to “bridge” the gap between the two competing language teaching approach and go eclectic, but the more I think about it, the more I would identify my teaching philosophy with communicative language teaching, but with a strong focus on structures and forms. But no matter approach I use, my ultimate goal as a classroom teacher is to 1) understand students’ learning processes and needs 2) master a large repertoire of teaching skills and techniques that will come in handy when I need to address different student’s different needs.

Hence, in my own classroom, you will see me use a wide range of teaching methods. I vary forms of input a lot---you will see me use visual and audio aids in additional to traditional textbook; you will also see me use authentic materials to supplement textbooks; I haven’t abandoned traditional grammar drills and explanations completely, because I know they can serve for a good purpose and I have found them extremely useful at the level of learners’ working memory. But more often, you will see me implement a task-based language teaching. By finishing a language task collectively or individually in the classroom, the students will not only achieve communicative purposes, but will also attend to the forms and structures of the language that are necessary for successful communication. As for PI, given that there is little pedagogical implementation and application out there, I feel that it is where I can go beyond my own classroom and contribute to the second language teaching and research in general.

References: