

Frame work for bridging theory and practical application in the esl classroom

The methods employed by teachers in the modern second language (L2) classrooms are based on the various beliefs that an individual teacher has about language, language learning and language teaching. These beliefs are reflections of L2 theories about language acquisition and learning that, like the methods employed, have changed considerably over recent years. There has been a drift away from a teacher centered style of pedagogy towards a communicative approach to language learning. This is in order to prepare students for effective real word communication in the TL. To bridge the gap and examine the relationship between theoretical approaches and practical applications of modern L2 teaching methodology, some kind of framework is necessary. To assist teachers evaluate, compare and understand the current methods available, Richards and Rodgers (2001) reworked and created an interdependent system using the levels of Approach, Design and Procedure, for exactly such a purpose. The effectiveness of this framework will be examined more closely in an attempt to clearly define the concepts put forward. Richards and Rodgers framework will then be applied to two different communicatively focused L2 teaching methods. These are the Communicative Language Teaching and the Natural Approach methods and will show how effective it is in describing and evaluating the differences between teaching methods at various levels.

Based on Anthony's (1963) original proposal for a framework to link teaching practices and the theoretical approaches that they stem from, Richards and Rodgers (2001) created an interrelated, three level framework, for describing teaching methods. They suggest that in the process of describing methods it is essential to clarify "the difference between a philosophy of language teaching at the level of theory and principles and a set of derived procedures for teaching a language" (p. 19). In other words, methods are seen as a term that covers the interrelationship between theory and practice. This is specified under the levels of Approach, Design and Procedure.

Approach: is seen as a theory of language and language learning that underlie a particular method.

Design: is the linking of views of language and language learning to a specification for language teaching, and

Procedure: is the translation of "Approach" and "Design" into an actual teaching/learning context as step by step actions in the classroom. (Mangubhai, 2006. p 1.35). In practical terms, "a method is theoretically related to an approach, is organizationally determined by a design, and is practically realized in a procedure (Richards and Rodgers 2001, p. 20). Taking a closer look at each of the three levels separately will make this interrelationship become more evident. As mentioned above Approach is defined as stated theories of language (linguistic theory) and language learning (learning theory) are used as a source for teaching methodology. The linguistic theories can be broken down into at least three different view points representing the modern approaches and methods in L2 teaching (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). These view points are as follows; *Structural*, *Functional* and *Interactional*. The *Structural* view sees the nature of language proficiency as a system of structurally related elements. Structuralism espouses that language proficiency is achieved by the mastering of these structural elements which typically include, grammatical operations, lexical items and phonological and grammatical units (p. 21). A *Functional* view of language proficiency follows a belief that there is a place for grammar (explicit and implicit) but semantic and communicative aspects are also considered. In other words, we use language to perform various functions in life and therefore language is all about the expression of meaning. In this linguistic theory, language teaching content is organized not by the structural elements but by the function and meaning of the language. A functional (or notional) syllabus, would define the concepts, topics and notions that the learners' communicative needs are centered on and not just the specific lexical and grammatical segments (p.21). The last of the three view points of linguistic theory is the *Interactional* view which sees language as a tool for "realizing interpersonal relationships and for social transactions between individuals" (Mangubhai, 2006, p. 1.37). According to Richards and Rodgers (2001, p.21) conversational exchange and the "patterns of moves, acts (and) negotiation" are the focus of interactional theories. These linguistic theories mentioned are not the only theories that teaching methods are derived from. Theories of language learning (learning theory) are also theoretical basis for teaching methods. Richards and Rodgers (2001, p.22) suggest that these theories are based on what conditions need to be met to facilitate learning and or what processes (cognitive and psycholinguistic) are involved in language learning. It can be a combination of both of these dimensions or just one.

The *Design* level of this framework is where the above mentioned language and language learning theories directly influence the focus of the components of what Mangubhai (2006, p. 1.34) calls an "instructional system". These components consist of : (A) objectives (B) selection and organization of language content (C) learning tasks and teaching activities (D) roles of * learners * teachers, and * instructional material (Richards and Rodgers 2001). Naturally it is the combination of theories subscribed to by the teacher in the approach phase that will dictate the subject matter (what to talk about) and the linguistic matter (how to talk about it). These are the *objectives*. The selection and organization of the content (or the syllabus) will again depend upon the particular method being used. (See below at the two examples given). It is through the interaction of students, teachers and materials that the objectives of a particular teaching method can be realized. Due to a method's different objectives, different activities are likely to take place or even the possibility of similar activities at different stages. What learning and teaching activities take place will be dependant on the theories used in the approach stage. The roles that both the learner and the teacher, as well as the instructional materials used play in each method used is related to the beliefs held about the theories in the approach. The role of materials is determined by all of the previously mentioned levels in the *Design* phase. It seems clear that where the teacher is the initiator and monitor of the learning that the materials will be significantly different from those where the learner is responsible for the level of input as in self-instruction (Mangubhai, 2006). What the materials aim to achieve (eg: present content, promote communication), and the form that they take will all be reflected in the role that materials play in each

method. The Final part of Richards and Rodgers framework, the *Procedure*, is where the description of what takes place and the ideas associated with it are actually carried out. This is a detailed account, a piece by piece description of the activities and how they are integrated into the workings of the class. Plus the way activities are used for practice and presentation. This includes how activities are used in the class, down to details such as setting up instructions and feedback during and after the activities themselves and assessment of the objectives. As mentioned above, the way that procedural elements of the class are implemented is dependant upon the theoretical *Approach* and the *Design* that stems from it. To fully understand how such a framework can be practical and useful, it is important to apply it to real L2 teaching methods. The two methods that will be compared are Communicative Language Teaching and the Natural Approach. In the process of doing this, the concept of 'Approach, Design and Procedure' can be more clearly identified. Teachers saw the short falls of grammar translation and audio-lingual methods as their students were left unable to 'communicate using appropriate social language, gestures, or expressions' in the culture of target language' (Galloway 1993). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), a method that encompasses a broad approach to language and especially language learning theory, arose from as a consequence. Due to this broad nature it is often described more as an approach rather than a method (Hadely 2001). Richards and Rodgers (1986) summarize some of the major principles of this approach to language as: * Meaning is the most important thing, and the use of context is necessary to get it across. * Use of the TL language is encouraged and learning will increase by attempting to use it. *Content, meaning and function determine the sequencing of materials, (among others which can be found in Hadley, 2001, p. 116-7). In Richards and Rodgers's (2001) view this would definitely be a functional approach to linguistic theory. The learning theory associated with CLT is again not so clearly stated with little research spelling out its underpinnings in this area (Mangubhai, 2006). Some of the concepts that may be inferred however are: 1. Activities that promote real communication promote learning. 2. Activities that in whichever language is used to promote meaningful tasks promote learning. 3. Language that the learner finds meaning promotes learning. Or as Richards and Rodgers (1986, cited in Hadley, 2001, p. 117) refer to as **1** communication principle, **2** task principle and **3** meaningfulness principle. The broad nature of the approach makes it difficult to concretely define the objectives of CLT. However, it can be stated that students will learn to: use language as a means of expression. Express functions that meet the learner's communicative needs and proficiency level. The syllabus is functional-notional or where selection and organization is based on subject matter. The notions would be categories that include location, frequency and motion. The functions learners need to express would revolve around communicative topics (such as self introductions etc), situations (such as ordering, traveling etc) and functional needs (such as describing something etc). The types of learning activities that would be commonly seen in the CLT approach would be those that 'generate a classroom atmosphere conducive to the development of communicative competence in all skill areas' (Hadely 2001, p.117). These types of activities would include interactive tasks with negotiation of meaning and information sharing such as problem solving by combining shared information discussions and conversations. The role of the teacher is seen as a needs analyst or a task designer or in simpler terms another classmate and a background facilitator who manages the process of the class group. The role of learner would counter this and be seen as one of the members of negotiators, an improviser, a contributor to his/her own learning as well as the others around them.(Rodgers 2001). The role of the materials will reflect the communication elements of this method and promote communicative language use and interaction. Some examples would include: real life materials such as newspapers, magazines, signs, photos, etc; tasks such as games, role plays pair activities etc and texts that show sentence patterns and use dialogues (Mangubhai 2006). How this is all carried out in the L2 classroom (the Procedure) is often difficult to define as there are a wide range of activities and approaches available. Galloway (1993) describes an activity using the TL and gestures where students must introduce 'themselves' in the target language. A simplified English adaptation of this task may involve the teacher holding up a card with some information on it while gesturing to the points being referred to. Teacher 'Hello my name is John. I come from Canada. Nice to meet you.' The students would then be encouraged to mingle with each other and introduce themselves as the people on the cards. Feedback may take the form of students reporting in small groups about whom they met and where they were from in a less restrictive environment. 'I met John and Peter from Canada and Taro from Japan'. (Although not a clear example on its own this should provide some idea of a CLT.) The Natural Approach, put forward by Terrell (1977) doesn't seem to stem so much from a theory of language, though it could be seen as 'meaning is the basis of language', rather than grammar, and hence vocabulary should be the main focus. The language learning theory is a much more influential starting point. Based on Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis this approach distinguishes between acquisition and learning in an attempt to mirror L1 acquisition and that acquisition can only occur by receiving comprehensible input. The four principles for this approach cited by Mangubhai (2006, p.1.22) are: (i) immediate communicative competence by providing comprehensible input, at a level slightly ahead of the students proficiency; (ii) Modify student's grammar rather than one rule at a time; (iii) Students acquire rather than learn language, and (iv) Emotional factors primarily affect learning that uses listening activities as the base for developing communication. The objectives proposed by the Natural Approach are more a set of guidelines than a strict focus to attain. The aim would be to give beginner-intermediate learners basic or 'survival' communicative skills. The syllabus selection of content would necessarily revolve around comprehensible input just beyond the current level of the learner. This would take the form of vocabulary graded to suit the learner's level and topics and activities of a communicative nature drawn

from the needs of the learner. The types of activities that would be used to present this approach would be similar to those communication generating activities mentioned above in CLT. Activities that use comprehensible input with the focus on meaning such as using contextual concrete examples and real objects and pictures, would be used. Hadely (2001, p.122) explains three main types of acquisition activities. These are; *comprehension activities* such as "listening comprehension practice with no requirements for students to speak in the target language", *early speech production* such as answering yes/no questions or answering personalized questions where only one word is required etc, and *speech emergence* which uses games, and problem and information solving activities. The role of the teacher is somewhat of a demanding one with the teachers constantly having to provide comprehensible input often in the form of modified language. The view of this teacher is seen by Rodgers (2001) as an actor of sorts, or a prop user. The teacher is the main source of input for the learner and must present this in a low anxiety way (as in Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis). The role the teacher plays in corrective feedback is minimal (Hadely 2001). The learner's role is to attempt to acquire, not learn, the L2 by fully taking part in meaningful communication activities in a low anxiety environment. This requires the learner to immerse themselves in the language and become what Rodgers (2001) calls a "guesser". The materials, in the process of reflecting the objectives, would be there to provide communication and comprehension. This reflects the way that a child learns a L1. Rather than the use of textbooks this approach would lend itself to the use of real life materials and pictures and examples of them. The procedural faze of the Natural Approach is again also difficult to define as it represents more of a guideline of teaching rather than a methodology (Richards 2001). An example provided by Terell himself of beginner level comprehension is described by Hadely (2001, p.122): The teacher would use gestures and simplified English (particularly in speed of delivery) to ask students who are described to stand up. If the activity is done for the first time then the teacher may wish to describe him/herself first as a way of introducing the activity. Students who are described are required to stand up, thereby acknowledging comprehension of the input, and no use of the TL is required. Slightly more advanced students may be shown a picture of, for example, a man standing in a park, wearing a blue shirt. The teacher may ask yes/no questions, such as "Is the man wearing a pink shirt?" If the student comprehends the question then the answer, "no" would be uttered. By dividing methods into three understandable and workable inter-related fields, Richards and Rodgers (2001) have made comparisons possible at numerous levels. This makes it easy to see where there are similarities or overlaps between different methods and where there are differences. This is particularly useful as methods may seem similar at one level but differ at others and sometimes only a small difference can be pinpointed. It is possible for a L2 teaching method to start in the any of the above three levels due to the interdependent aspect proposed by the authors. This fact makes this framework particularly useful to evaluate, describe and compare different methods across the actual areas in class procedures, theoretical approach and the design and use of content and materials. Through this framework, similarities and differences can be identified at any combination of the three levels, i.e. all three, two, or even just one of the levels. For example, teachers with similar theoretical beliefs may have different ways of applying those concepts in a real class environment and using this framework to compare the two teaching methods makes those distinctions clearer and easier to distinguish. The depth at which this framework describes the roles prescribed to Teachers, Learners and Materials is particularly useful for linking the theory behind a method to what actually happens in the class. Its only draw back might be that it doesn't cater for methods/approaches that aren't so easily turned into teaching activities and texts, though perhaps this is more a criticism of the said method rather than the framework. 2850.

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About the Author

Brendan Dilk: Teaching in experience: Japan, Australia, UK particularly interested in learning theories.

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