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Sixteen principles of language teaching

Paul Nation

Methods and principles

Very few teachers or researchers now follow any particular method or approach in their language teaching. Even where it is possible to determine the unique features that go to make up a method such as oral-aural, audio-lingual, cognitive code, or communicative, it is usually not possible to show that one method achieves better results than another. In addition, practitioners of a method soon find a remarkable similarity between methods that are supposed to be quite different from each other, particularly in the selection and sequencing of the items that make up a course. This same similarity leads us to suspect that the various published courses are either drawing on the same findings of research and theory or are unquestioningly repeating what other courses have repeated from some previous poorly based piece of course design. When we find, for example, that a 'modern' course is using a syllabus that differs in only minor detail from one used by Berlitz in the 1890s and that does not agree with the findings of substantial research in this area (George 1963; Ota 1963; Kennedy 1992), then our worst suspicions are justified.

A 'method' approach to course design seems to result in some aspects of course design being well thought out and well founded on research, but in many aspects being ignored or not well thought out. Richards and Rodgers (1986) have demonstrated this point most clearly in their analysis of methods such as Total Physical Response and Silent Way.

The basis of the problems described above is that *none* of the various aspects of course design have been systematically based on research and theory. This is not because of an absence

of suitable research and theory. It is more because of an unwillingness to look at what is already known and to apply it to course design without being distracted by the need to adhere to a method.

The purpose of this paper is to show that a sensible basis to guide teaching and to help in the design of courses rests on following principles. These principles must be based on research and theory, and must be general enough to allow variety and flexibility in their application to suit the wide range of conditions in which language is taught.

The sixteen principles

The principles described here are based on a pedagogical perspective, focusing on course design and teacher training. A similar list could be made from a learning perspective.

Each principle in the list is there because it is supported by research and theory in any of three fields: second or foreign language learning, first language learning, and general educational research and theory. The principles are not unique to language teaching, but could equally well apply to the teaching of mathematics or motorcycle maintenance. Their application, however, must draw as much as possible on research and theory within their field of application.

The principles have been divided into four groups which are based on steps in course design. The first group contains only one principle and relates to the other three groups. In each of the other groups the principles have been ranked in order of their importance, so that the first principle in a group is the most important of that group, the second principle is the next most important and so on.

Planning

- 1 The selection, ordering, and presentation (including assessment) of the material in a language course should be based on a careful consideration of the learners, their needs, the teaching conditions, and the time and resources available.

Selection

The second group contains principles which deal with the selection of material to go into a course. It answers the question

What are the learning goals of the course? The five principles of selection are listed here.

- 2 A language course should progressively cover useful language items, skills, and strategies.

This principle means that the course should have explicit language teaching goals and that there should be some way of ensuring that there is opportunity for the goals to be reached. This principle is applied in a variety of ways by different language teaching methods. Aural-oral courses and many others assign particular structures, functions, or vocabulary to particular lessons. Good examples of this can be found in courses like the *Cambridge English Course* which lists the items to be learned in each lesson in its very detailed table of contents. Other less formally organised approaches still should have explicit goals. A course based on substantial amounts of reading or listening input may be working within a carefully controlled grading scheme as is the case with graded reader series like Longman Structural Readers or Heinemann Guided readers.

- 3 The language focus of a course needs to be on the generalisable features of the language.

This principle does not imply that all of the attention of the teacher and learners is directed towards formal features of the language. What it means is that where attention is directed to language features these features should be predominantly regular features. A command of these features will enable the learners to make 'creative' use of the language. That is, it will allow them to say or write things that they have not met or produced before, and to understand things that they have not met or produced before. If the teacher wants to check that this principle is being applied in a particular lesson, then the teacher should ask this question, 'Does today's work help the learners to deal with tomorrow's task?'

The principle can be applied at all levels of language. The following list indicates areas of focus.

Vocabulary

high frequency vocabulary
underlying meaning
word parts

Structure

frequent structures
regular structures

Discourse

topic type
rhetorical structure
cohesive devices

Strategies

guessing from context
using mnemonic techniques
using notetaking and planning strategies
practising negotiation of meaning

- 4 A language course should provide activities aimed at increasing the fluency with which learners can use the language they already know, both receptively and productively.

Fluency activities do not aim to teach new language items but aim to give the learner ready access to what is already known. They typically involve a focus on the message with repeated opportunities to reach a higher than usual standard of performance (Nation 1991).

- 5 A language course should provide the best possible coverage of language in use through the inclusion of items that occur frequently in the language, so that learners get the best return for their learning effort.

This principle is looked at in detail later in this paper.

- 6 A language course should train learners in how to learn a language and how to monitor and be aware of their learning, so that they can become effective and independent language learners.

This principle is based on studies showing the value of metacognitive awareness in learning. It also reinforces the importance of strategies for both language learning and language use.

The aim of these five principles is to make sure that learners are gaining something useful from the course. It is possible to run a language course which is full of interesting activities and which introduces the learners to new language items, but which provides a very poor return for the time invested in it. This poor return can occur because many of the lessons do not contain anything new, or because the new items have little value in the ordinary use of the language. The major weakness of most language courses lies in their failure to apply sensible principles of selection.

Ordering

The third group of principles deals with the order in which items are met in a course. Underlying the four principles in this section is the idea that if items are not in a suitable sequence then no learning may occur or learning may be made more difficult.

- 7 The teaching of language items should take account of the most favourable sequencing of these items and should take account of when the learners are most ready to learn them.

Pienemann (1985) presents evidence for an acquisitional sequence in which learners develop a command of inter-language rules. According to Pienemann's 'teachability hypothesis', 'the course of second language development cannot be altered by factors external to the learner'. That is, it is not possible to alter the order of the sequence as a result of teaching. In addition, teaching is effective when it focuses on the items that are next in the learners' sequence of acquisition. Ellis (1985) includes most of these ideas in his 11 hypotheses about second language acquisition. The importance of this research is that it provides a theoretical, logical and testable basis for syllabus construction, and that it indicates an effective, though restricted, role for

teaching. Because the research is still in its early stages, we have only an elementary list of sequenced grammatical items to guide teaching and do not have easily applied tests to indicate the learners' stage in the sequence of development (Pienemann, Johnston and Brindley 1988).

- 8 The course should help learners make the most effective use of previous knowledge.

Much of the previous knowledge that is brought to second language learning comes from the learners' first language. The effect of this knowledge on second language learning has been a matter of debate with some arguing that the first language has a major effect on second language learning (Lado 1957; Ringbom 1987) and others arguing that second language learning like first language learning occurs without the influence of other languages. Part of the reason for the debate has been that second language learning occurs in a variety of circumstances. Where the language is learned as a foreign language with little opportunity for contact and use outside the classroom, the effect of the first language is more noticeable. Where the classroom is only one of a range of sources for second language input as with the second language learning of English in the United States, first language influence is less noticeable. Proficiency already gained in the second language is another source of previous knowledge for application of this principle.

- 9 The items in a language course should be sequenced so that items which are learned together have a positive effect on each other for learning and so that interference effects are avoided.

Research has shown that items which have loose indirect connections with each other (indirect free associates) are learned more effectively if they are learned at the same time. Items which have strong meaning relationships (opposites, near synonyms, free associates) interfere with each other and thus make learning more

difficult (George 1962; Higa 1963). In view of this evidence and the very large body of evidence on paired associate learning, it is surprising that courses still present opposites and alternative expressions of the same idea (near synonyms) together. Unfortunately the order of items within the course reflects the associations in the course designer's mind rather than what will help learning.

- 10 Learners should have repeated opportunities to give attention to wanted items in a variety of contexts.

The evidence to support this principle comes from studies of the effects of repetition on learning (Kachroo 1962; Saragi et al 1978) and the levels of processing theory (Craik and Tulving 1975). A few course books check to make sure that they provide repetition but these are exceptional. It is too difficult and time-consuming for an individual teacher to do such checking. The simplest and possibly the most useful way to check is to test frequently whether wanted items are learned. Research by Hall (1990) indicates that opportunity for creative productive use of new items may result in more significant learning than simply meeting the item receptively or using it in modelled ways.

Presentation

The fourth group of principles deals with the presentation of material in a language course.

- 11 As much as possible, the learners should be interested and excited about learning the language and they should come to value this learning.

- 12 As much time as possible should be spent using and focusing on the second language.

This principle is based on the research finding that one of the best indicators of how much will be learned is how long the learners spend on appropriate learning activities. The more time learners spend on language learning, the more they learn. The principle gains some

support from the correlation between length of time spent living in a country where the foreign language is spoken and proficiency in the language.

- 13 Learners should process the items to be learned as deeply and as thoughtfully as possible.

This principle is looked at in detail in a later section of this paper.

- 14 A course should be presented so that the learners have the most favourable attitudes to the language, to users of the language, to the teacher's skill in teaching the language, and to their chance of success in learning the language.

Recent research and thinking about second language learning have given an important role to 'affective' factors. Affective factors refers to feelings and attitudes and includes such things as motivation, shyness about speaking a strange language, opinions about native speakers of the second language, and attitudes towards the teacher. If learners have negative attitudes towards the language and its users, or if they feel personally threatened by having to use the language, this will make it difficult for them to progress in learning the language. Some of these affective factors may be influenced by the teacher and by the way the course is organised.

- 15 There should be substantial quantities of interesting comprehensible receptive activity in both listening and reading.

In a very practical and well-conducted experiment, Elley and Mangubhai (1981) replaced part of Fijian learners of English drill-based English lessons with self-directed reading of interesting children's books. Eight months later, with four English classes per week, it was found that the learners in the experimental group had made 15 months' progress on a variety of proficiency measures of English. The large amounts of reading that the learners did was not in addition to their usual English course. It replaced about one-third

of the usual course. Other experiments, although not as large scale or as well-designed as the Elley and Mangubhai study, indicate a similar effect for large quantities of listening. The theoretical justification for such an approach to language learning rests on the idea that learners need to build up and are capable of building up an understanding of the language system before they are called on to produce language (Nord 1980).

- 16 Learners should receive helpful feedback which will allow them to improve the quality of their language use.

Focus on the product of communication, particularly in reading and writing, can have a positive effect on language use. Feedback about the process of communication can bring about valuable improvement in writing and in formal speaking. What can a teacher do to check that there is sufficient feedback in a course? The following checklist is intended as a guide.

- (1) Do the learners have regular opportunities for careful language production?
- (2) Do the learners have appropriate checklists or scales to monitor their written work? Has the teacher set up a peer checking system to make sure that the scales are used?
- (3) Does the teacher have a realistic list of aspects of language use that learners can be encouraged to monitor?
- (4) Do the learners regularly do information gap or opinion gap activities which encourage peer negotiation?
- (5) Do the learners wish to receive feedback about their language use from the teacher or from each other?
- (6) Does the teacher make use of a process approach to writing and formal speaking?
- (7) Is the teacher aware of the aspects of the writing and speaking processes where the learners most need help?

- (8) Does the teacher make regular use of an informative and acceptable feedback system for written work?
- (9) Do learners understand the system and make use of the feedback?

Using the list of principles

The previous brief discussion of the sixteen principles has attempted to explain the principles and to indicate their application in course design. The list of principles however has a much wider range of uses.

- 1 It can be used to guide the design of language teaching courses and lessons.
- 2 It can be used to evaluate existing courses and lessons.
- 3 It can be used to help teachers integrate and contextualise information gained from keeping up with developments in their field. For example, when reading articles from journals such as *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language Learning*, *Applied Linguistics* or *RELC Journal*, teachers can try to decide what principle is being addressed by the article and how the article helps in the application of a principle.
- 4 It can provide a basis for teachers to use in reflecting on their practice and professional development. It may provide a basis for action research within their classrooms. It can help them answer questions like 'Is this a good technique?', 'Should I use group work?', and 'Do my learners need to speak a lot in class?'
- 5 It can act as one of many possible reference points in teacher training courses.

Two principles applied

Let us now take two of the principles as examples and for each of them: (1) see what the principle means, the research support for it, and its usual application; (2) see what to look for in a course to check that the principle is being applied; and (3) see what to do in order to put the principle into practice if it has not been applied.

A language course should provide the best possible coverage of language in use through the inclusion of items that occur frequently in the language, so that learners get the best return for their learning effort.

- (1) Many years of research on vocabulary frequency, the frequency of grammatical structures, and English for Special Purposes needs analysis have resulted in a substantial amount of information about the frequency of occurrence of various types of items and of the coverage of text provided by knowledge of the most frequent items. The most striking figures are for vocabulary: knowing 10 items provides recognition of 25% of written text, 100 items 50%, 1,000 items 70% and 2,000 items over 80%. It is possible to state a few general rules about frequency, coverage and types of items (Nation 1990).
 - 1 A small number of high frequency items will cover a large proportion of a text.
 - 2 After the few most frequent items are known, a very large number of low frequency items must be known to cover the remainder of the text.
 - 3 Typically, high frequency items are simple in their form (but not necessarily in their meaning!). These rules can be applied to the selection of material for language courses in the following ways.
 - 1 A language course should give most attention to the high frequency items of the language.
 - 2 Low frequency items should be dealt with only when the high frequency items have been sufficiently learned. It may be more efficient to teach the learners strategies for learning and coping with low frequency items rather than for the teacher to present the low frequency items themselves.

Most courses do not have a sensible selection of frequent items. The selection of items seems to be opportunistic and traditional rather than principled and with a concern for frequency of occurrence.

There are arguments against using frequency of occurrence as

the *only* criterion for the selection and ordering of items. But, if frequency is ignored as a criterion, as George (1972) has shown, lack of a good return for learning effort is not the only bad result.

(2) A language course can be checked to see if it focuses on the high frequency items of the language by comparing it with available frequency lists. For vocabulary, the list could be West's (1953) *General Service List*, the *Cambridge English Lexicon* (though this does not provide frequency figures), or a more recent frequency count like Kučera and Francis (1967) or Carroll, Davies and Richman (1971).

Verb form frequency can be checked against George's (1963) verb form frequency count.

(3) If a course contains a mixture of high and low frequency items that does not give the best available return for learning effort, a teacher may wish to do the following things.

- 1 Make supplementary material to include all the high frequency items which are at the appropriate level for the learners. In a typical beginners' course, for example, this would probably involve including *verb + to + stem*.
 - 2 Ignore or pass quickly over the low frequency items that have been included. If these items are likely to be included in an external exam, quickly teach appropriate ways of dealing with them in the exams. These ways may simply involve the memorisation of rules rather than trying to gain active use of the low frequency items.
 - 3 Provide substantial amounts of practice of the high frequency items both in and out of class. This can include the use of graded readers, graded listening to stories, guided and free writing, and guided speaking.
Learners should process the items to be learned as deeply and as thoughtfully as possible.
- (1) The 'levels of processing' hypothesis (Craik and Lockhart 1972) proposes that the single most important factor in learning is the quality of mental activity in the mind of the learners at the moment that learning takes place. Items that are repeated without thoughtful attention will not be learned

as quickly or retained as long as those that are related to past experience, result in some meaning-directed effort, or are thoughtfully analysed. Another way of expressing this principle is to say that 'the quantity of learning depends on the quality of mental activity at the moment of learning'.

Many teachers apply this principle without really being aware of it. They do it to keep the attention and interest of their learners. Applying the principle requires only a small change to normal teaching procedures. Here are some examples.

- 1 Instead of translating the meaning of a useful unknown word, the teacher describes its meaning using foreign language explanations. So, to describe *allow* the teacher might say 'I will not allow my children to eat dirty food'. While listening, the learners have to find the appropriate first language translation. Instead of the teacher providing the translation and the learners making little effort, the learners make the effort and work to find the translation. This also gives the teacher useful feedback. Variations of this technique are described in Nation (1978).
 - 2 While doing a substitution table activity, the teacher writes the items on the board. The teacher gives a spoken model and points to the appropriate parts of the table. The learners repeat. As the exercise continues, the teacher gradually rubs out words and phrases from the table so that the learners are repeating parts from memory.
 - 3 Before the learners read a text the teacher shows them the first sentence of each paragraph. The learners look at each sentence and discuss it in groups in order to anticipate what will come next in the paragraph. After guessing, they then read the paragraph. Reading thus becomes a more thoughtful and informed activity.
- (2) It is possible to check how much a course applies the levels of processing principle by looking at the various exercise types that it uses and ranking them according to the depth of processing they require from the learners. Most courses regularly make use of only a small range of techniques and these are the ones that should be considered rather than the 'one-

off activities. It is not straightforward to rank diverse activities according to a single scale of depth but it is worth doing so, particularly if one considers that each activity used takes time that might be more profitably spent doing some other activity. The following scale for depth of processing is offered as a starting point for such ranking. The learners' level of proficiency and the relevance of their L1 knowledge will have a strong effect on the positions of items on the scale.

Superficial processing

Type of processing	Techniques
formal repetition	drill
normal language processing at I+1	reading graded readers
deduction to examples	relating new items to experience
reproduction involving long term memory	dicto-comp
inductive analysis	What is it!
prediction	self-questioning scales
use of mnemonic devices	keyword

Deep processing

(3) If a course does not provide opportunities for adequate depth of processing, a teacher can make up for this lack

- 1 By making use of a new range of teaching techniques that encourage such processing
- 2 By training the learners to apply depth of processing strategies to their own learning.

This paper has suggested sixteen principles of teaching and learning that can provide a basis for course design and evaluation, and teacher development. The selection and ranking of these principles reflect a personal view of language teaching. I have tried to balance this by seeking suggestions from colleagues and by comparing the list with points made in recent articles in professional journals and with overviews of course design and language teaching and learning. One of the values

in using a principle based approach to language teaching is that developments in theory and research can be easily accommodated by altering, expanding, removing, or adding a principle without having to discard all the other principles. In this way our knowledge of language teaching can grow without being subject to the blanket acceptance or rejection that is typical of methods. The list of principles in this paper provides a possible starting point for this growth.

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