

The old and the new: reconsidering eclecticism in language teaching

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Abstract

A method of language teaching is a style of instruction that expresses the professional commitment of the teacher in support of an assumption of how language is learned. After the ideological excesses of the audio-lingual method, it is understandable that teachers adopted a “once bitten, twice shy” approach, which for many amounted to adopting eclecticism. This paper considers five arguments against eclecticism, the inevitable continuities with the old in what are paraded as innovative methodologies, and how one may handle professionally the truly new in language teaching methods. Turning to arguments for eclecticism, the paper suggests two main conditions for adopting it as professional stance, and gives three examples of where combinations of language teaching methods have in fact enriched our practice. The paper concludes with a set of explanations, and two examples from other African countries (Eritrea and Namibia) that have emerged from recent studies (Tesfamariam 2000; Shaalukeni 2000), of why the communicative approach to language teaching, even though it is regarded by teachers as the reigning orthodoxy in language teaching, has not been adopted by teachers on our continent.

What started the argument

THERE IS NOTHING THAT QUITE FOCUSES THE MIND SO SHARPLY AS having to condense, for a class of aspirant language teachers, the knowledge and experience of a range of language teaching styles, stretching over several generations of language teaching fads and fashions. My own recent attempts to do this for those fourth year students who annually come to our classes

to specialise in the teaching of a particular language, English, took the form of a prospective book, *Designing language teaching* (Weideman 2001), in which I set out to describe how various successive language teaching methodologies relate to one another, and to broader trends in language teaching. In order to make the description more coherent, I chose a central argument: whether eclecticism is a valid approach for the initiate.

The rationale for selecting eclecticism as a theme is its current fashionability in language teaching. This fashionability is strengthened by arguments, especially from the side of critical pedagogy, against method. Critical pedagogy is especially, and justifiably, wary of progressivist notions inherent in language teaching. These notions date back, of course, to the inception of applied linguistics, and the concept of a ‘scientific’ (and thus ‘best’) kind of language teaching, which was most prominently expressed in the audio-lingual method. Proponents of the audio-lingual method (ALM) thought that they could validate their teaching techniques by claiming that the method was based on scientific analysis (cf. Lado 1964: 49ff.).

Critical pedagogists deny, again correctly, that progress is inevitable when one subjects a problem to ‘scientific’ analysis in the conventional Western understanding of the term. Pennycook (1989: 601), for example, is sharply critical of the notion that the application of ‘scientific’ principles to language teaching has achieved any progress at all. Rather, he maintains, than presenting us with the results of steady, linear progress, the current language teaching situation is merely a ‘different configuration of the same basic options’ (Pennycook 1989: 608). As Kumaravadivelu (1994: 28) has also pointed out, “as long as we are caught up in the web of method, we will continue to get entangled in an unending search for an unavailable solution, ... a search [which] drives us to continually recycle the same old ideas ...” The causes for change in language teaching, and in ‘new’ language teaching methods, lie, in this view, in the main with social, political or philosophical factors.

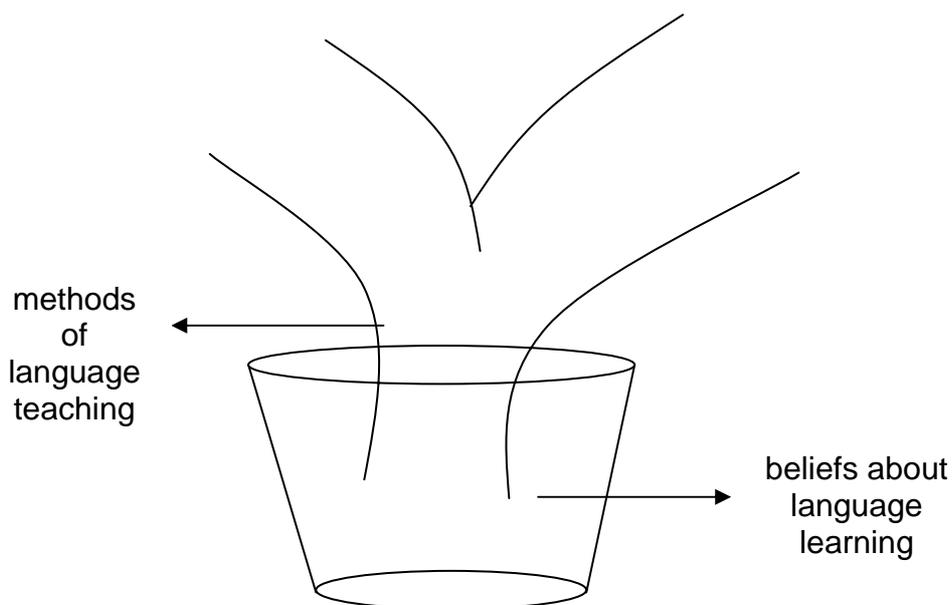
There is no doubt that progressivist notions in language teaching have indeed now been thoroughly discredited. Yet it does not necessarily follow, as critical pedagogists would have it, that considering language teaching methods is merely perpetuating the considerable vested interests that there are in language teaching. One argument in particular that encourages the continuing consideration and discussion of language teaching methodology is Larsen-Freeman's (1993) proposition that *methods of language teaching express beliefs about language learning*.

It is a pity, therefore, that when teachers gave up on the audio-lingual method, they did not go one step further, to question the belief behind the practices of the ALM. Instead, many who were disillusioned by audio-lingualism chose to select new materials, or opted sometimes to start varying their technique of teaching, or to try to make the boring drills interesting by placing them in a more realistic context. In a word, they became eclectic in their approach. In fact, eclecticism became so widely acceptable that today many good teachers use it proudly as a tag to describe their teaching, wearing it almost like a badge of honour. They are saying, in effect: "We have been rescued from the excesses of audio-lingualism. Rather than believe in any single way of teaching, we subscribe to moderate doses of (almost) everything." No matter that audio-lingualism is long discredited. The excessively strong, indeed ideological beliefs that audio-lingualism spawned about the nature of language learning made teachers its victims and not its beneficiaries. And, of course, it made teachers who fell victim to its beguiling, behaviourist undertone (*language is learned by repetition*) wary of being trapped again. Rather be safe than sorry!

If it is so that methods are, amongst other things, expressions of teachers' beliefs about language learning, then, for example, a method of language teaching like the ALM is an expression of the belief that language learning is learning a set of habits. The teacher can help to re-inforce the language by designing exercises that require the learners to repeat different and specific forms of the language being learned.

Indeed, as soon as we begin to probe, we note that all language teaching methods proceed from some belief; all express, in the styles of teaching that they encourage, some assumption about how one learns a new language.

The following picture tries to express this concept in a non-verbal form:



In the same way that a plant draws nourishment from the soil, language teaching methods find their roots in beliefs about language learning. Though language teaching method is influenced also by other factors, such as the teacher's view of language (see Richards & Rodgers 1986: 19), we limit ourselves, for the moment and for the sake of the argument, to the former thesis.

If aspiring teachers do not want to become victims of a particular method (and the beliefs that it expresses), then the study of how these methods have influenced our textbooks is particularly important. In fact, methods have a significant influence on the textbooks we use. Many teachers, one must remember, never move beyond the prescribed textbook that is readily available. Thus, if they use the textbook without any reflection on how it builds on a method of language teaching, they unwittingly fall prey to the beliefs about learning embodied in that method. Worse still, they often uncritically accept the authority of the textbook: if

it's written down, it must be good or true. For teachers and learners to benefit from the textbook materials that they use, teachers have to be able to identify the methods that form the backbone of the textbook. If they don't, they set themselves up as victims of the methods that they remain unaware of. Worst of all, they remain caught up in the ways that they were taught, unquestioningly using their own experience as the model for their own students. Of course, as one reviewer has pointed out, this constitutes an important argument for including textbook analysis in teacher training.

Below, we shall present two sets of arguments, one against, and one for eclecticism. Indeed, the question to be answered is also whether there is anything wrong with eclecticism *per se*. Are there different ways of being eclectic? Is a 'principled' eclecticism possible?

Eclecticism: the disadvantages

When teachers and textbook authors recovered from the ideologically compelling arguments of audio-lingualism — namely that it was a scientifically supported, 'correct' method — one can imagine that they may have wanted to avoid once again becoming victims of a method. As we have noted, this safer route for many involved adopting an **eclectic** attitude to language teaching.

My analysis (Weideman 2001) suggests that one falls prey more easily to traditional methods than to current or new methods. Perhaps this is not strictly correct. Any method, current or past, may assail us with compelling arguments and captivate us professionally, thus preventing us from considering alternatives. Yet an analysis of successive language teaching methods that I have done seems to imply that the three different directions of the communicative approach to language teaching offer us a greater chance of becoming the **beneficiaries** of a certain approach to language teaching than any traditional approach. The three directions

within the communicative approach I am referring to are (a) the use of Authentic texts, which, as the name implies, brings authentic materials in modified or unmodified form into the language classroom for instructional purposes, and constitutes an early form of communicative teaching; (b) Mainstream communicative teaching or language teaching with an ‘L’ emphasis — for ‘language’ — such as grew out of Wilkins’s (1976) seminal work, is concerned with syllabus design that meets learners’ functional language needs (cf. Littlewood 1981: 82-84), and is often characterised by a focus on function and the technique of role play; (c) ‘P’ emphases — for a ‘psychological’ or emotional focus — which stress affective factors, such as the Natural approach or styles of teaching that combine learning with drama, play and games (cf. Roberts 1982 and Weideman 2001: chapters 3 and 4 for a more detailed discussion). One should perhaps note that the terms ‘approach’, ‘method’, and ‘style’ are used here in a fairly interchangeable way, with ‘approach’ signalling a broader movement within language teaching, and ‘method’ and ‘style’ being used as synonyms (Richards & Rogers 1986: chapter 2 contains a detailed and useful discussion of these distinctions).

The point of the analysis being referred to here is that the debate and discussion that have accompanied communicative language teaching (CLT) do not guarantee immunity from ideological entrapment, but certainly indicate a vigorous and continuing examination of the theoretical arguments being used to justify this approach in all its different directions and forms.

Be that as it may, the eclectic attitude that teachers often adopt as a safe approach that will protect them from becoming victims of method has several distinct disadvantages.

Firstly, if it is adopted as a safe strategy that immunises one against ideological undercurrents in language teaching methods, it cuts teachers off from the reconsideration of their professional practices. In a word, it discourages them to

reflect upon their teaching. They have made up their minds, will use anything that ‘works’ to obtain results, and are safe from ideological excesses.

But is this such a safe approach?

Indeed, one must consider, secondly, that adopting an ‘anything goes’ position can have exactly the opposite result of playing it safe. Because one adopts a language teaching practice without much deliberation, one can just as easily fall victim to the methodological baggage that comes with it. In spite of good intentions, as Kumaravadivelu (1994: 30) observes,

eclecticism at the classroom level invariably degenerates into an unsystematic, unprincipled, and uncritical pedagogy because teachers with very little professional preparation to be eclectic in a principled way have little option but to randomly put together a package of techniques from various methods and label it eclectic.

This remark indeed brings us to a third argument against eclecticism. Mixing all manner of methods and approaches may result in gathering in one’s teaching arsenal such a mixed bag that all kinds of conflicts might arise. Or, to use another analogy, a mixed brew may sometimes be sweet to the taste, but it can just as easily upset one’s stomach! Indeed, if there are **conflicting** approaches in one’s instructional techniques, one may have contrary results to those one is striving for.

Take as an example simultaneously adopting both a behaviourist position (every error must be immediately corrected, lest it become a bad language habit), and the ‘P’ approach within CLT. The latter emphasises a supportive, non-threatening learning environment, one which is tolerant of mistakes. Clearly one cannot adhere to both positions at the same time. Or what about the Grammar-translation teacher wanting to teach partly through an approach that disallows translation altogether, such as the Direct method? What does the eclectic teacher do in such cases?

There is a fourth argument for me against an eclecticism that is not accompanied by **deliberate** choice, or not backed up by argument as well as by practical and theoretical justification. This is that teachers, when introduced to new

methods and techniques, so quickly integrate into their traditional styles of teaching the new ‘tricks’ they are shown that they forget about the rationale for the techniques altogether. It is like cutting the technique off from its theoretical roots, which may have enriched it and allowed it to develop when used deliberately.

A fifth and final argument, related to the one just mentioned, is that if an innovative technique is used only occasionally, and mixed in with other (potentially contradictory) ones, the effect of the new is **diluted**.

Any analysis of historically successive language teaching methods will indicate that there are all kinds of **continuities** among the different traditional and current methods. This means that there are already similarities and relationships between almost all methods. A good example of a similarity in technique, among traditional methods, is their use of fill-in-the-blank types of exercises. Another example of a relationship across traditional methods and current ones is the affinity between the intention of the Direct method to expose learners directly to the target language, and the Total Physical Response (TPR) technique of learning through actions. A third example of continuity between traditional and current approaches is the concern, in both the Audio-lingual method and communicative language teaching, with all four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

The situation is equally opaque when one looks at textbooks. Some textbooks draw on a variety of potentially contradictory methods, apparently without any deliberation.

The result of the similarities and continuities that the methods already contain, including such eclectic mixes in textbooks, is almost always that the effect of the new is diluted. The question then is: what is the use of further diluting the potential effect of the innovation, if the innovation itself is already a compromise?

One must consider, therefore, that in spite of exhibiting similarities, all methods introduce something new. The effect of the innovation is reduced when we do not, as language teachers, take a method to its conclusion, or push it to its limits. Let me give one example. In the *Starting English* course for young beginners

(Weideman & Rousseau 1996), the authors designed a number of the language teaching tasks by using methods that are essentially known as suitable for *adult* learning. Nonetheless, when adaptations of the technique known as the Silent Way and the method called Community Language Learning were deliberately tried out during the piloting phase of the materials, they worked exceptionally and surprisingly well with young learners.

The lesson from this is that, rather than diluting the new, we should push the method to its limits. Once we have familiarised ourselves with the justification for the new technique or method, the exciting possibility is that we can exploit its potential more fully, in ways that its original proposers may not initially have considered or conceived, but that are nevertheless in line with the principles of the method.

The foundation of the argument against eclecticism, however, rests upon the notion of professional integrity. If we borrow from all over, do we not lose the wholeness of our own, developing approach to language teaching in the classroom?

The discussion so far suggests that there may also be arguments for adopting an eclectic approach. Indeed, if one can adopt a new method deliberately, maintain awareness of its original rationale, and remain wary of contradictions within one's chosen teaching style, there seems to be the possibility, at least, that one can steer clear of the main dangers associated with an eclectic approach. As one anonymous reviewer has pointed out, the argument that emerges in this section is perhaps more about the dangers of an unprincipled eclecticism than anything else.

Eclecticism: the positive side

The best argument for adopting an eclectic approach is probably that it has the potential of keeping the language teacher open to **alternatives**. In this way, it can even be seen as an antidote to becoming complacent about one's language teaching practices. Provided, therefore, that the teacher embraces a dynamic interpretation of

eclecticism, i.e. actively seeks out new techniques, trying them out in their professional practice all the time, one may be able to justify eclecticism. One must add the further rider that new techniques must also be considered in terms of their underlying rationale.

These provisions are important, if an eclectic approach is not to become a mere excuse for either passively accepting anything that comes along, or making compromises with the traditional simply because it is the way of least resistance. A teacher trainer in another field — mathematics — once remarked to me that she was always worried when teachers approached her after a workshop that introduced a new mathematics teaching method, with the comment that they had actually always been doing this. She therefore deliberately strove to make the technique as foreign as possible, so that no-one was tempted to say: “I’ve actually been doing this all along.”

There are other arguments for eclecticism too. When one looks at the history of language teaching, it is clear that some methods rely heavily on earlier ones. Or they attempt to improve upon them by seeking to strengthen their weak points. The case of the ALM is an example. This is a method that, while adding something new (a strongly behaviourist justification and associated techniques), is indeed a combination of the different emphases of two traditional methods: the ALM attempted to emphasise all four language skills, unlike the methods that had preceded it, the Grammar-translation method and the Direct method. The following diagram makes clear how the ALM both relied and improved upon the earlier two:

	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Grammar-translation method	—	—	✓	✓
Direct method	✓	✓	—	—
Audio-lingual method	✓	✓	✓	✓

In making this **combination**, the ALM is indeed an eclectic method.

Similarly, the Natural approach is seen by some as nothing more than an **extension** of the concerns of the Direct method, and could in that sense also be considered eclectic. Wherever one finds continuities, an argument can be made for eclecticism: the one method carries forward the concerns of another. And since we can observe continuities everywhere, it is easy to make the argument that all methods are eclectic.

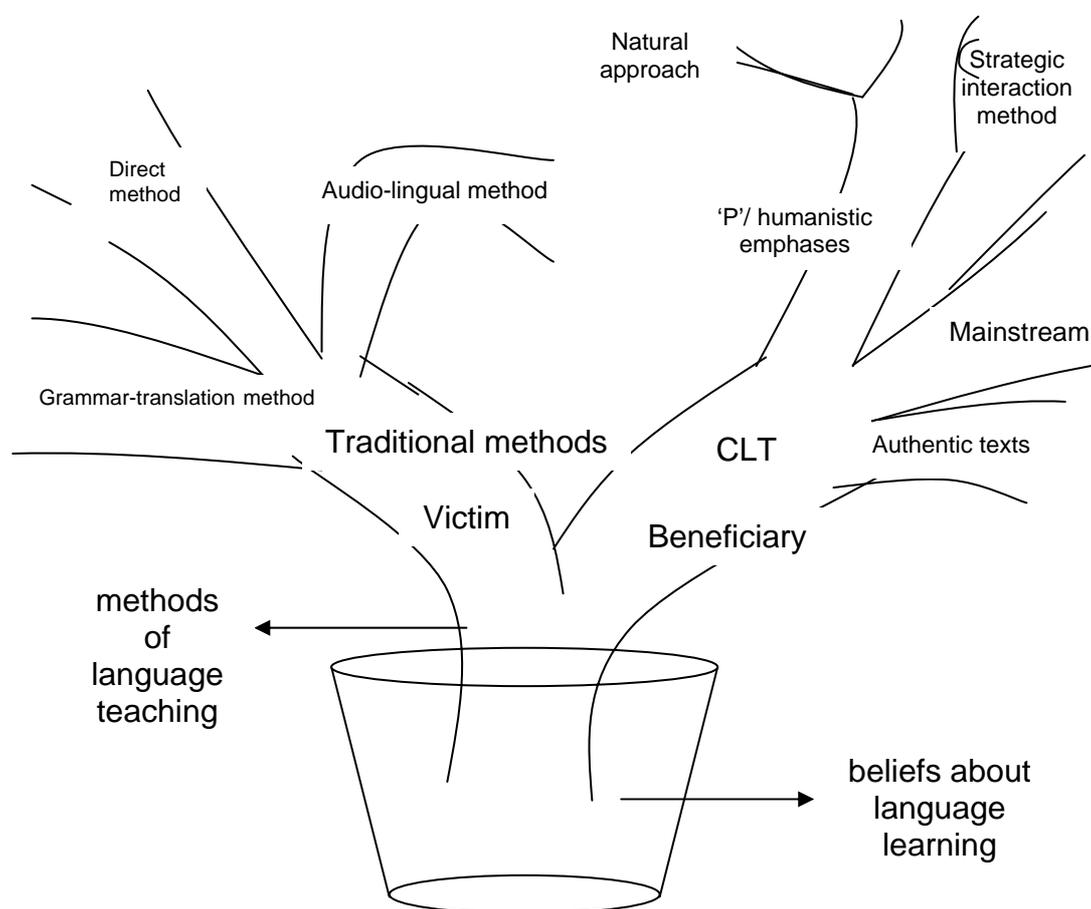
What one should note, in all such cases, are, of course, also the differences. One difference between the Natural approach and the Direct method is that the latter relies heavily on memory, as well as on a direct association between form and meaning, which therefore justifies the direct exposure of the learners to the target language (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 9), without interference from the first language, while the Natural approach strives for a language teaching design that takes into consideration a number of psychological factors concerning what a good environment for language learning is. For this reason, the Natural approach delays oral production, through the use of techniques such as TPR, or listening to stories. In this respect it is the opposite of the Direct method.

As a consequence of this delay to introduce speaking in the target language early on, however, the Natural approach does then indeed become eclectic, allowing the subsequent introduction of information gap activities and a variety of other tasks that involve speaking. Indeed, in the *Starting English* course, we combined the pre-speech activities in the course with techniques, such as the Silent Way and Community Language Learning, that eventually compel learners to produce spoken English.

Similarly, there is the possibility of combining the ‘L’ and ‘P’ emphases in communicative teaching (cf. Roberts, 1982 and 1986), yielding, in addition to the other three mentioned above, a fourth direction within CLT. This way of teaching communicatively, sometimes called the Strategic interaction method, carries the promise of combining not only the emotional and lingual emphases within CLT, but also suggests a way of combining the reading of literature — a traditional

concern that has endured in spite of the introduction of communicative and quasi-communicative syllabi — with the teaching of a target language.

Let's extend the tree figure that I have used to illustrate the concept of method as an expression of a set of beliefs about language learning to get an idea of how the various language teaching methodologies referred to here combine and relate, and where they fit in. One must understand that a picture can never capture these complex relationships entirely, but it can illuminate otherwise difficult concepts. The image below, while it certainly has its limitations, attempts to do just this:



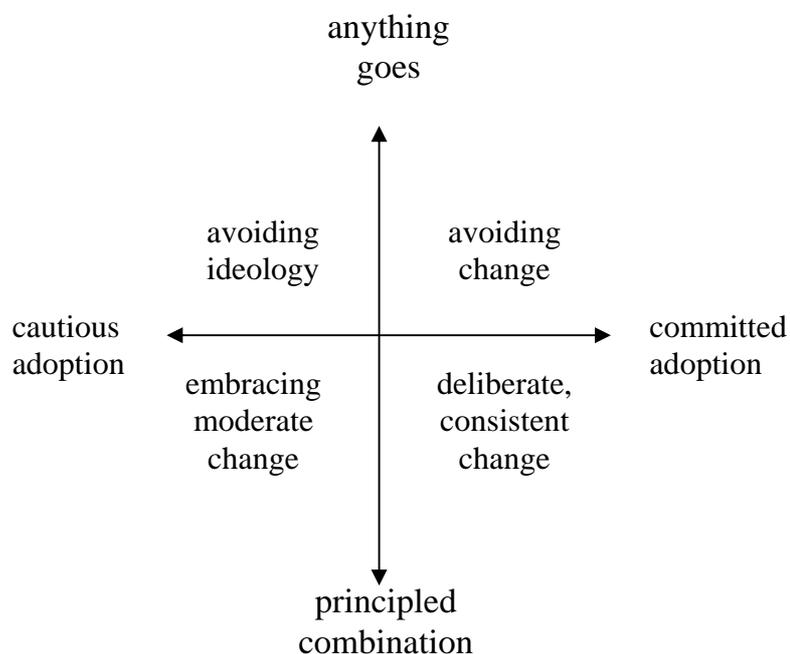
To sum up: if one can employ a number of methods deliberately to achieve language teaching and learning goals, such an approach may yield a professionally stimulating experience. But if, on the other hand, one uses an eclectic argument merely for the sake of avoiding commitment and playing it safe, never coming to

an understanding of the roots of the techniques that one adopts, the only effect it may have is to dilute the effect of the new.

Reconsidering eclecticism

From our discussion so far, it should be evident that there may be a difference between the eclecticism of the teacher, who has to combine and adapt different techniques and methods in the crucible of the classroom, and the deliberate, considered eclecticism being practised by an experienced course designer. The latter may well have more theoretical sophistication, while the former may be indicative of practical experience and know-how. How many different types of eclecticism does one find in language teaching? And how would one categorise them? In discussing the ideas being put forward here with others, two sets of concepts, introduced into the debate by Elaine Ridge and David Langan, have allowed me to focus more sharply on these questions. The diagram below attempts to explain, in terms of the opposites of ‘anything goes’ and ‘principled combination’, that we may find variations of eclecticism that either try to steer a cautious or a committed course between these opposites.

If our intention is to avoid ideological entrapment, a case that we have referred to before, we may be tempted to adopt a *laissez faire* approach. The risk is that we may then fall into the trap of traditionalism, and end up avoiding all change. In that case, our ‘anything goes’ type of eclecticism is simply an excuse for resisting change. One’s commitment is then to the *status quo*. Perhaps, however, if one is just a little more venturesome, one may cautiously combine elements in a limited way, embracing change to some extent. If we want to risk opening up and committing our language teaching to deliberate and consistent change, on the other hand, a principled combination of methods may be the best way to go.



One may map onto this diagram a further set of parameters, to see yet another dimension of eclecticism. The following matrix deals with the effects of adopting an eclectic approach in terms of the concepts of coherence and change. Thus, for example, if we are highly resistant to change, and do not care overmuch whether our approach to language teaching is coherent, we may not think that it is bad to make **compromises**. If, on the other hand, we have a high resistance to change, and consider our own approach to be coherent, we would wish to **maintain** it just as it is. If we have a lower resistance to change, but do not care much for consistency and coherence, we may be able to **accommodate** various combinations of methods when we teach. However, should we have a low resistance to change, and are seeking to have a consistent, deliberate and coherent approach, we are likely to commit ourselves to **innovation** in the development of our own language teaching:

high	compromise	maintain
resistance to change	accommodate	innovate
low	low	high
	coherence of own approach	

These two diagrams are offered here as the beginning of the debate on this. We should note that the terms that have now been introduced into this debate (change, maintenance, innovation, tradition) are, again, related to the history of the field. Without a knowledge of the history of language teaching, falling victim to a method becomes much more likely, and becoming a beneficiary less so.

Can we regain integrity?

The main question, therefore, seems to be: are teachers doomed to be the victims of ideological commitment to a certain language teaching method, or even to a certain set of assumptions about language learning? The ones who say: “We are eclectic” seem to answer: of course not! What they fail to understand, is that this drifting from one good idea to the next is itself a belief. And its effect is to be seen in the work of many good language teachers, who spend a lifetime collecting interesting, attractive materials to liven up their teaching, and never spare a thought for the learners in the process. They accommodate and compromise, but may lack either reason or commitment for doing so. What is more, in an eclectic approach there is no guarantee that learners — like their teachers — might ever make sense of how they are learning. Learners may be exposed to a wealth of interesting materials and

an attractive variety of exercises, but might never learn anything through them. How do these materials make it easier for learners to develop? What is the underlying rationale for using this or that set of exercises? Learners may therefore often remember merely the personalities of their lively language teacher, but may not recognise how their success or failure at learning the target language relates to the teaching methods employed.

In short, we may never think about what we put our trust in; we might never bother to articulate our beliefs and assumptions about language teaching. But, as teachers, we owe it to the learners who are in our care to question our own beliefs, to probe for our hidden assumptions, and to bring them to the surface. Once we can hold up our beliefs about language teaching to the light, we might be able to understand our own professional practices so much better. To return to the concepts introduced in the previous section, we might find that being committed to a coherent approach may amount to nothing more than the adoption of a traditionalist stance. If our language teaching practices remain firmly rooted in traditional approaches, the term ‘eclectic’ merely provides camouflage for an unwillingness to change.

To have a set of beliefs about language teaching that is in tune with one’s view of the world is a magnificent achievement. But to teach in a way that is out of step with what one believes is truly a nightmare. In the late 1980’s, a number of teacher trainers who worked within NGOs in South Africa remarked to me about how autocratic the teachers were with whom they worked. The irony is, they were dealing with real firebrands, teachers who were, at the time, at the forefront of the political struggle for freedom. There was a complete mismatch between the democratic ideals that these teachers stood for, and the way that they handled their classes. These must have been very unhappy teachers! To teach in a way that is not consistent with what one deeply believes in, must be unpleasant not only for the ones who do the teaching, but also for the recipients of their teaching.

Such conditions, where teaching practices contradict teachers’ own beliefs, are not limited to South Africa. Today, there are very few teachers of other

languages that will openly confess to holding views that are contrary to the reigning orthodoxy, CLT. Yet there is widespread evidence that their classroom practices are at variance with their beliefs. The study done by Karavas-Doukas (1996) among Greek-speaking teachers of English in Greece showed up just how big the differences are between these teachers' practices and their beliefs.

What holds for Greece and South Africa also appears to be true for other countries. Three recent studies on Namibia (Shaalukeni 2000, Shaninga 2000) and Eritrea (Tesfamariam 2000) indicate that the situation is similar in these countries. Shaalukeni, for example, using a classroom observation instrument that she developed to measure meaningful interaction among learners in the target language, found that the amount of teacher talk, in the Northern Namibian classrooms she observed, makes learner talk almost impossible; that learners themselves, as well as their parents, prefer and expect what she calls the 'quiet' African classroom; that traditional styles of teaching remain firmly entrenched, and that innovations are therefore resisted. Similarly, Tesfamariam (2000) found that in Eritrea traditional language teaching is so strong that there is an almost complete mismatch between the new, skills-based communicative syllabus and its implementation in the classroom. In fact, even though a new set of textbooks has been written and printed, teachers find ways around its demands of implementing the new.

The irony is that in none of these cases the teachers would admit to opposing the new, reigning orthodoxy, CLT. One may speculate as to the reasons for the lip service that teachers pay to CLT. As one anonymous reviewer has pointed out, South African teachers were probably thoroughly underprepared for adopting this approach, and possibly still lack an understanding of either the learning theory or the view of language behind the approach. All of this of course deserves further attention in our ongoing investigations and research. Yet the resistance of teachers to adopt the new at least also reveals a lack of understanding of the commitments they have to traditional language teaching.

This discussion has been about getting a grip on such commitments, and on our beliefs about language learning. It is a plea that we should identify the style of

teaching that we commit ourselves to as a result of what we believe in. For aspiring teachers, of course, it is not only about identifying a style that is in tune with their beliefs, but of developing one with which they will be personally satisfied.

The discussion has also been about the complacency that comes with the adoption of a specific style, and about overcoming it through the continual examination of one's own practices. It is interesting to note, for example, that in an earlier discussion of what he calls 'the postmethod condition', Kumaravadivelu (1994: 30) opts not for eclecticism, but for what he terms a principled pragmatism that goes beyond method. In addition, the 'postmethod' condition includes a more autonomous, reflective teacher. To be a professional language teacher is to be able to evaluate critically the teaching practices proposed by prescribed syllabuses, with which many teachers are forced to work. Finally, it is about overcoming prejudice against styles of teaching that, because we do not understand either their philosophy or their approach, we tend to avoid. If we can gain understanding of the beliefs that guide those styles that we would normally be averse to using, we might greatly enrich our own teaching.

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