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Scott Thornbury's 30 Language Teaching Methods

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Scott Thornbury

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Why I wrote this book

'Another book about methods? I thought methods were dead. I thought we were now in a post-method era.'

It's true that the concept of 'method' is generally shunned in the literature on language teaching nowadays. Even as long ago as 1969, L.G. Kelly, in his survey of language teaching over the last 25 centuries, contended that 'methods are of little interest'. In similar fashion, H. H. Stern (1983) announced 'a break with the method concept', due in part to the failure of researchers to find any significant advantage in one method over another. In 1990, N.S. Prabhu wrote an influential paper called 'There is no best method – why?' and in the following year Dick Allwright published another called 'The Death of Method'.

Subsequently, B. Kumaravadivelu (1994) identified what he called the 'postmethod condition', a result of 'the widespread dissatisfaction with the conventional concept of method'. At around the same time, Adrian Holliday (1994) was arguing the case for 'appropriate methodology' which must, first and foremost, be sensitive to the local culture – something which imported methods are probably not.

Nevertheless, in the popular imagination at least, faith in the idea of method persists. Websites advertising new and improved methods for language learning abound. Here are some promotional slogans taken at random:

> Learning a foreign language is easy with the XXX Method.
> The highly acclaimed YYY Method lets you pick up a new language naturally.
> Over a period of more than 15 years, ZZZ has developed and perfected a unique method of teaching languages.

What's more, training courses regularly include a component on the history of language teaching methods. Teachers in general are intrigued by the variety of methods that have been proposed, and are often keen to experiment with them. Indeed, as D. Bell (2007) discovered, when he canvassed a number of teachers, 'methods, however the term is defined, are not dead. Teachers seem to be aware of both the usefulness of methods and the need to go beyond them'.

One attraction of methods is that they offer coherent templates for generating classroom routines. The method helps structure what – to both teachers and learners – is a potentially haphazard experience. It provides answers to questions like: *Where do I start? What materials and activities should I use? In what order? To what end?* For novice teachers, in particular, methods offer a lifeline. For more experienced teachers, they offer a toolkit. As Richards and Rodgers (2014) put it, 'methods can be studied not as prescriptions for how to teach but as a source of well-used practices, which teachers can adapt or implement based on their own needs'.

Of course, a method is of not much use if we don't believe in it – if, in Prabhu's (1990) terms, it contravenes a teacher's 'sense of plausibility'. Methods are underpinned by beliefs about learning and language and, even if these are not always made explicit, we need to feel in harmony with them.

But if the method does fit, if it does resonate with our beliefs, then it has every chance of working – not because it is intrinsically sound (remember 'there is no best method'), but because it confers on a teacher a degree of confidence in his or her own efficacy. Jane Spiro (2013) puts it very well: 'The critical factor in success is the commitment and belief of the teacher in the methods he or she is using, and the continuing reflection of the teacher as to whether these methods are making a positive difference'.

This book, then, aims to unpack – not just the history of methods – but the beliefs that underpin them and the benefits that still might possibly accrue from experimenting with them.

Some notes on terminology

Not all the methods included in this book have *method* as part of their label: some are called *approaches*, and one is simply a *way*. But they are all consistent with David Nunan's (2003) definition: 'A language teaching method is a single set of procedures which teachers are to follow in the classroom. Methods are usually based on a set of beliefs about the nature of language and learning'. Researchers are quick to point out, of course, that no two teachers will implement a method in exactly the same way – hence the idea of a method being 'a single set of procedures' is necessarily an idealized one. For this reason, I am ignoring the distinction that is often made between *method* and *approach,* because, in terms of what happens in actual classrooms, it is of little consequence.

Methodology, on the other hand, is a more general term to characterize the classroom procedures and activities that teachers select – such as error correction, group work, or video viewing – and the way that these are managed, irrespective of the specific method that they subscribe to.

How this book is organized

Most training courses and methodology texts include a section on 'the history of methods' and this typically takes the form of a 'modernist' narrative, i.e. one of uninterrupted progress from 'darkness into light'. In actual fact, a closer reading of the history suggests that this account is over-simplified, and that methods not only co-exist, often for long periods of time, but are continuously re-invented out of the same basic ingredients. This book, then, aims to counteract the traditional narrative by grouping methods according to what they have in common, even if separated in time, and to dispel the view that methods 'die' and no longer have anything to offer us.

The choice of methods to include has been motivated by a number of factors: primarily, the strength of their influence over time (e.g. the Direct Method, Communicative Language Teaching), but, conversely, their relative failure to gain wider acceptance, despite their intrinsic merits (e.g. the Comparative Method, text memorization). Rehabilitating these 'lost methods' because of what they still might have to offer us has been another reason I wrote this book. Also included are those ways in which people learn languages that are not classroom-based, thereby stretching Nunan's definition (above) to extend to self-study and even immersion. At the same time, this book does not hope to be exhaustive, neither in terms of the methods that it covers nor in terms of the detail with which each one is described. Space simply does not permit.

Despite these limitations, it is hoped that you will not only have a broader understanding of the enormous variety of ways that languages are – and have been – learned, but also be in a better position to evaluate some current practices – a necessary step in our continued professional development.

Abbreviations

To save space, and repetition, here is a list of common abbreviations used in this book:

EFL = English as a foreign language

ELF = English as a lingua franca

ESL = English as a second language

ELT = English language teaching

L1 = first language/mother tongue
L2 = second (or additional) language

SLA = second language acquisition

TESOL = teaching English to speakers of other languages

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