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Keeping it practical and keeping it simple

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When I look back over my career as a teacher-trainer and researcher, I can see two themes that run through my work. The first theme is my concern for the practical issues of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), with the strong proviso that practice must be based as far as possible in research. For me this represents the APPLIED in applied linguistics. The second theme is a concern for seeing what the parts are that make up the whole. I think underlying this concern is the desire to see the principles governing the way the parts go together, and underlying this is a tendency to want to see what is simple and rule-based. Knowledge needs to be communicated to others and this is best done if we are aware of the important basic principles and components, and can present them as simply as possible.

Applied linguistics is a very broad field, but in my view the teaching and learning of languages is central to the field, and central to teaching and learning is the methodology of language teaching. Certainly, this is the expectation of teachers who enrol in Diploma and Masters programmes. They tend to be mildly surprised that there are other courses besides teaching methodology. Fortunately, this surprise is usually a pleasant one. Nonetheless, applied linguistics needs to be able to directly address the issue of how languages are learned and taught in simple and practical ways. My own approach has been to be rather prescriptive, largely because I feel I need to not only be able to interpret research but also show how it can be applied. It is still possible to allow for flexibility in such a prescriptive approach if the recommendations are based on principles rather than ‘a methodology’, because principles can be applied to fit local conditions and local experience. For example, research shows that increasing the amount of engaging input that learners get can have striking results on language learning, but the amount of input needs to be substantial. This principle can be applied in a wide variety of practical ways which should take account of what will work in local circumstances. In countries where group activities are valued over solitary activities, shared reading, group listening and reading aloud may be more practicable than silent reading or individual work.

This bridging of the potential gap between research and practice is for me the essential core of applied linguistics. Research is most valuable when it is applied to practice. Practice is most likely to be effective if it is research based. Unfortunately, with the increasing professionalization of applied linguistics, the practical application of research has to some degree lost status. This is evident in the movement of journals like *ELT Journal*, *TESOL*

Quarterly, *RELC Journal* and *System* to publishing research reports rather than also giving substantial space to articles directly addressing teachers. In my early career, journals directly speaking to teachers outnumbered journals publishing reports of research. Now the balance has strongly gone the other way. This would be fine if it was simply the result of an increase in the number of journals publishing research. Unfortunately, it is also the result of the loss of journals with a strong practical focus, and the refocusing of existing journals. Perhaps the internet will offer a solution to this imbalance which aids in devaluing the practical.

Keeping it practical

The practical orientation in my work came directly from the job I got when I completed my Master's degree, and was strongly reinforced by my experience outside New Zealand teaching EFL and training EFL teachers.

In 1961 Victoria University of Wellington in co-operation with the External Aid Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which provided much of the funding, set up an English Language Institute (ELI). It had the jobs of preparing non-native speaking scholarship holders for university study, and training teachers of English from the Pacific and South-east Asia. The university preparation course ran from November to February (over the New Zealand summer) and the teacher training programme leading to a Cert TESL (Teaching English as a second language) or a Dip TESL ran from March to October. Staff were required to teach on both programmes, and so this meant that every year we taught English as a second language and trained teachers of English. That is, we had to tell teachers how to do it and then we had to do it ourselves. Some of the students in the university preparation course were also course members of the following teacher training course. We were clearly required to put our money where our mouth was!

For many years the Dip TESL (later the Dip TESOL) was the centre of our teacher training efforts at Victoria University. Although this course was originally a full-time course, it soon had a lot of part-timers enrolled in it. This meant that there had to be classes in the late afternoon to allow teachers to finish their school teaching and then get to the university. The entry requirements for the Dip TESOL required previous teaching experience and thus the course was effectively an inservice course. Inservice courses must address the needs of their course members and this had the effect of keeping our teaching methodology offerings very practical. Even when the more research-focused M.A. replaced the Dip TESOL, this practical orientation remained, particularly in the methodology courses, which are the core of any teacher-focused programme.

In the mid-1990s I began teaching occasionally at Temple University Japan (TUJ), first for a full year while on leave from Victoria University of Wellington, then for a six-month visit, and then for several one-semester visits. Like our Dip TESOL and M.A. students in New Zealand, the TUJ students were very keen. They were sacrificing considerable amounts of money, time, and time with their family to further their study, and unsurprisingly they expected value for money. Inservice graduate teaching is very rewarding because of the commitment of the course members. When I eventually did some undergraduate teaching, I realised how fortunate I had been. Many of the students in undergraduate classes are simply

there to get the credit with no strong interest in the subject. I wonder in what direction my interests may have gone if my experience had largely involved undergraduate teaching.

Our connection with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also meant that there were opportunities to get involved in aid projects, and I had two postings in Indonesia (for a total of four years) and one in Thailand (for two years). In fact, I spent six of my first ten years in the job in these overseas postings – training teachers in Indonesia, and preparing scholarship holders in Thailand for study in Western universities and more pressingly to pass the TOEFL or IELTS tests. My colleagues and I were among the first wave of a new generation of language teachers and teacher trainers who came into the profession from relevant university study. This study was later considerably enriched with overseas teaching experience.

Nowadays, the route into the profession is through academic study, as it was for me. Previous to that, trainers of teachers of EFL were literature graduates who had drifted into language teaching through teaching overseas and had then made it a profession. Some of the early giants of the field like Michael West and Harold Palmer, and my own mentor, H. V. George, had entered the field in this accidental way. I was fortunate enough to be able to get overseas postings through our department's connection with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But getting sustained overseas experience may now involve giving up an academic post to take a lesser paid teaching appointment with an uncertain future. Without this experience, the tendency may be for teacher training to become more academic as trainers teach to their strengths.

While in Indonesia, I began to write, and undertake research. Fittingly, my first pieces of writing were focused on language teaching techniques and vocabulary. Like many untrained teachers at the beginning of their teaching career, I was concerned with what activities I could use in the classroom, and I set myself the task of combing the literature to make a comprehensive list of language teaching techniques. I was greatly helped in this task by the existence of journals such as *English Language Teaching* (later called *ELT Journal*), and *English Teaching Forum* which were both strongly practical, and to a lesser but still important degree by journals such as *Language Learning*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Foreign Language Annals*, and *The Modern Language Journal*. In those pre-computer days, searching a journal was truly a search, involving first of all finding the copies of the journals themselves and then painstakingly going through each issue for relevant articles. My collection of techniques and activities grew, and having been instructed by H. V. George, the director of the ELI, in the importance of vocabulary control, I wrote my descriptions of the techniques within the first 2,000 words of English. My students at the teachers' college in Indonesia had very a limited command of English, and as I was writing for them, I had to make sure that difficult language did not get in the way of the ideas I was trying to describe.

The research basis for practical ideas has always been important to me. In recent years, having taught research methods courses and collaborated in a book on vocabulary research methods, I have also come to value common sense. Research has its limitations and its gaps.

Thus, we need to put research findings and our practice up against common sense. Sometimes research and common sense do not agree and then we must make a carefully thought out judgement. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is in my attachment to the idea of the four strands, which simply stated is that a well-balanced language course should

involve equal parts of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning (deliberate attention to language), and fluency development. There is no research evidence to support this equal division of the teaching and learning time, and the research and advocacy on comprehensible input go against it. But it does not make sense to have language courses that exclude some deliberate study and that do not provide opportunity for output. Similarly, a minor battle is raging in corpus-based vocabulary studies on the choice of lemma or word family as the unit of counting words. Putting aside the idea that the battle is misconceived, it does not make sense to me to suggest that low proficiency learners cannot be readily helped to deal with known word stems ending in *-ly* (*slowly, happily*) or known stems using the *-er* suffix (*teacher, learner*). We need to carefully consider research results and judge them using common sense. Perhaps the most striking examples of this for me come from several research studies that show the value of setting up a programme of deliberate vocabulary teaching usually related to reading. Their results show a significant increase in vocabulary knowledge as a result of the lengthy programmes. However, when we look at the hours of time invested and the amount of vocabulary taught and retained on an hourly basis, the teaching rates are around one word every hour or two, and the learning rates are half that (Carlo et al., 2004; Lesaux et al., 2010). No-one with any common sense would support programmes with such poor levels of efficiency even though they have yielded statistically significant results for vocabulary growth.

Keeping it simple

When I started teaching, some of the articles I read, for example those by Alun Rees, looked very analytically at particular techniques showing how by making small changes they could be varied. At that time I also read Earl Stevick's (1959) early article called "'Technemes" and the rhythm of class activity'. Stevick was also interested in looking at techniques analytically. He suggested that you could tell if a change made to a technique was a significant one or not (that is, if it resulted in a significantly different techneme) by observing what the learners in the class did when the technique was adjusted. If it resulted in an increase in attention and interest, you had a new techneme. If there was no change in attention, then the change was non-significant and you still had the same old technique.

This idea grabbed me. It was clear from my collection of techniques that there were lots of variants of drills, for example. If you went around the class systematically getting learners to repeat sentences in the drill, did this become a different technique if you varied the order of choosing people to repeat the sentences? Was this a different technique when you increased the speed of the activity? It was clear that techniques had smaller parts and knowing these parts would give teachers a great resource in maintaining interest and in controlling what Stevick called 'the rhythm of class activity'. Very practical!

The result of all this thinking about teaching techniques was an article published in the *RELC Journal* called 'Creating and adapting language teaching techniques' (Nation 1976). Although this article had no effect on anyone else (with the exception of Andrew Cohen), it influenced a lot of subsequent articles I wrote and confirmed me in an analytical approach to the study of language teaching. This led me to look for principles rather than approaches,

conditions rather than processes, features rather than techniques, and strands rather than models.

The various analyses fit together in meaningful ways. The analysis of language teaching techniques has the major goal of effective learning from a particular activity or set of activities. This effective learning depends on interest which comes through variety and challenge, and on repetition and the quality of meetings with language items. In my early analyses, as in the creating and adapting article, my focus was on interest. In more recent analyses, as in Chapter 3 of *Learning vocabulary in another language* (Nation 2013) and in my book from Oxford University Press with Stuart Webb, my focus has been on repetition and quality of meetings. Extensive reading is likely to be effective if learners have a real interest in reading. This interest can be encouraged by the challenge of reading in a foreign language. For this challenge to work there needs to be enough unfamiliar language features for the learner to see that there is something to take their knowledge of the language forward, but not so many that it becomes an intolerable burden, hence the need for graded texts. Other language teaching techniques and activities use different challenges, such as speed, limited time, and a hidden answer. A record of the number of books read can be a motivator for extensive reading. Variety in extensive reading comes from a variety of engaging topics, while in other activities it can come from variations in the activity itself. Extensive reading is an effective activity because it provides repetition of language features, although quantity of input is needed to work against Zipf's law, which describes the occurrence of repetition in normal texts, where around half of the different words are likely to occur only once. It also provides quality of meetings through retrieval with varied meetings. That is, when words are met again in extensive reading they are typically in new contexts and this helps learning. Other language teaching techniques and activities use different ways of ensuring quality of meetings, such as productive retrieval, elaboration and deliberate attention.

The classification of techniques and activities into the larger course components of strands (meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development) tries to make sure that there is an appropriate balance of learning opportunities with their related learning goals (Nation 2007). The strands make sure that the use of techniques fits into a wider picture of what is needed and what is efficient in ensuring that what is learned will help the learners to be able to use the language they are learning. Extensive reading fits into the two strands of meaning-focused input and fluency development. The meaning-focused input strand has the goals of language feature learning (vocabulary and grammar), and skill development (reading skills). The fluency development strand, which in the case of extensive reading involves reading very easy books quickly, has the goal of fluency, being able to use the language at a normal speed. In the case of extensive reading, fluency involves reading at a speed of over 200 words per minute.

Principles are an alternative to methods. Instead of following a particular method or approach, such as the communicative approach, which may have its own set of principles, it is better to be more flexible and informed by following your own principles. The four strands involve several principles, at least one for each strand. Similarly, the analysis and evaluation of techniques involves principles, such as the need for repetition and quality of processing.

Teachers can gain an understanding of how to teach and how to help learning by becoming familiar with principles of teaching, by analysing the four strands of their course, and by analysing teaching techniques.

Even at the level of the word, there are principles and components. Some words contain word parts, words have core meanings that include their polysemes, and words collocate with other words in principled non-arbitrary ways.

Writing and its effects

My time in Indonesia truly got me started on research and publication. I also learned that writing was an excellent way of clarifying my thinking, especially if I tried to write as simply and clearly as possible. In addition, working with difficult teaching conditions and a scarcity of resources made me able to teach anywhere under any conditions without having to have teaching supports.

In New Zealand, I did a survey review of research and practice in vocabulary teaching and learning. I expected to find about 20–30 papers to review. To my surprise I found several hundred. I went about the search very systematically and built up a large database of papers. Some of the work that really impressed me was Masanori Higa's paper on the psycholinguistic concept of vocabulary difficulty (Higa 1965), Michael West's study of reading (West 1955), Charles Barber's corpus-based work on specialised language (1962), and George Zipf's work on vocabulary frequency. Eventually this survey resulted in my first book, *Teaching and learning vocabulary*, with its substantial bibliography. Like most of my books, this one grew partly out of my teaching and went through several in-house versions before it was published. That is, it was not originally written for publication but to get my ideas clear and to provide a resource for students on my courses.

As I came to know more active researchers in the field, like Batia Laufer and Paul Meara, the in-house copies spread. Rupert Ingram, the founder of the publishing company Newbury House, looked at a copy, and when he visited New Zealand to meet with Helen Barnard about her *Advanced English vocabulary* pre-university English course books, he said he was interested in publishing it. He gave me some very practical advice that I have followed – *Try to answer questions that teachers ask*. Years later, I had to some degree forgotten that I do this and Stuart Webb, when writing a review of some of my work, pointed it out, noting that my chapter headings and especially subheadings were often questions.

The way that I wrote *Teaching and learning vocabulary* has been a pattern for almost every book and article I have written. Primarily I write for myself to gather the ideas and to get them organised. I don't like writing proposals, largely because writing is a process of discovery. How can I know what will be in the book and how it will be organised until I have written it? There were substantial versions of *Learning vocabulary in another language* written years before a publisher knew about it and looked at it. Indeed, it got published because Mike Long was working on something to do with vocabulary and someone suggested he ask me and I sent him a copy. He and Jack Richards were series editors for Cambridge and after they saw the whole book wondered if I was interested in getting it considered for the series. Writing a book

in my own time gets rid of deadlines, and although I am good at keeping to deadlines, I would rather not have them. Because my books are closely related to classes I teach, feedback from students and my own critical reading while teaching the course bring many improvements to the book.

Having said that, I think about what I am going to write and make notes long before I write. I generally get a satisfactory organisation of the ideas on the first go at writing. If I don't, I am in trouble, because the poor organisation is a direct reflection of my confusion about that particular area. A notable example is the chapter on multiword units and collocation in *Learning vocabulary in another language*. That chapter was completely re-written in the second edition and still I am less than happy about it. I suspect my confusion is shared by many others.

Methods, principles and the four strands

When I worked in Thailand for a Thai government department, the British Council kindly provided space for a group of us from various institutions to meet about once a month to talk about language teaching, and the British Council also organised a small conference for us. That conference was a real eye-opener for me. I clearly remember one afternoon when there were three successive papers, all excellent, each of which began something like this. 'I follow a humanistic approach to language teaching, and so here is what I do.' For 'humanistic' substitute 'discourse-focused' and 'communicative'. Here were three different teachers, each carefully following rather different approaches that they understood well and I am sure achieving very useful results for their students. I was fascinated by this. Clearly there was more than one effective method of language teaching. A few years later I had a similar experience while on a Fulbright scholarship at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio. While there I was invited to evaluate courses at the Summer Institute of uncommonly taught languages being held at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Between the invitation and my arrival, the organisers had changed their minds and now did not want an evaluation, but were happy for me to observe classes and give a talk. Indonesian was being taught using an oral-aural approach with grammar explanation. Khmer was taught using a native speaker assisting a teacher who knew more about language teaching than Khmer. Burmese was taught in a very British communicative way in a kind of tutorial where the students used the language to deliver a talk. I would have very happily studied in any of the classes. Each was well run, engaging for the students and apparently very effective in developing their proficiency, and each was very different from the others.

All of this was around the period when there was a move away from 'methods' of language teaching. Misconceived projects comparing various methods were delivering non-results. Writers like Stevick (1974) (The riddle of the right method) and later Brown (1993) (Requiem for methods) argued that method as in the oral-aural, grammar-translation or direct methods was too broad a unit to make sense of success and failure in language learning. The most obvious replacement was principles. Individual principles in a set of principles could be changed, replaced or deleted as research and experience provided more information. It was

not necessary to abandon everything and start anew if there was dissatisfaction with what was currently used. In addition, the same principle could be applied in a variety of ways to suit local conditions and teachers' and learners' preferences. I thus started to develop my own set of principles and they first appeared in the very early versions of a book on curriculum design (Nation & Macalister 2010). What is unsettling is that this list has undergone very little change from when it was first made. I have periodically checked it against other people's lists (Krahnke & Christison 1983; Brown 1993; Day & Bamford 2002; Ellis 2005), but have found no reason to make changes. This either shows remarkable astuteness when first making the list or a reluctance to see things in a new light. You choose.

After a few years of teaching courses on curriculum design and pondering over the principles, in the mid-1990s (Nation 1996) I eventually arrived at the idea of the four strands. I have found this to be a very useful idea for curriculum design and it turns out to have interesting implications for the allocation of time to certain activities and techniques in a language course, and in the choice of activities and techniques. These implications are explored in Chapter 1 of *What should every EFL teacher know?* (Nation 2013). One of the most attractive features of the four strands is that it allows for the inclusion of unfashionable but very useful activities like rote learning from word cards, substitution tables, and grammar-translation with the very important proviso that they must fit into a clearly limited proportion of the course time. This means that the wishes and expectations of teachers and learners can be met without upsetting the balance of opportunities for learning.

Reflecting on why I arrived at the idea of the four strands, I feel it is because I have had wide interests in fluency development, extensive reading, vocabulary learning, and speaking activities, and have researched and published in these areas. Any framework that I devise would need to incorporate all these focuses.

Looking to future research, I am in strong support of Porte (2012) when he argues for the need for replications. We need imaginative new research of the kind we see from Norbert Schmitt and his colleagues and students, but we also need to look again at the ideas we take for granted. It is not an exaggeration to say that virtually every Ph.D. student I have supervised has proven me wrong, and often spectacularly wrong on some important point that I thought was supported by research. Some of our most treasured ideas on vocabulary size, text coverage, fluency development and vocabulary learning are based on one or two rather shaky pieces of research. As well as expanding our investigations, we need to revisit what we think we know, and surprise ourselves with the uncertainty of our knowledge.

Now that I have retired, I have been writing the following books (among other things).

What should every EFL teacher know?

What should every ESL teacher know?

What do you need to know to learn a foreign language?

What should primary school teachers know about vocabulary?

Some of these books are available free from my website and they bring together a lot of research and experience. Answering questions teachers ask has now graduated from the level of the sub-heading to the level of the book title.

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