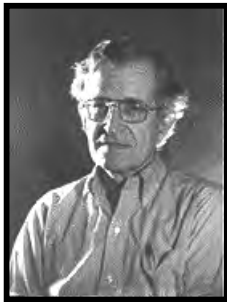


Book Review: Is Change Upon Us?

Jane Willis & Dave Willis, Ed. Challenge and Change in Language Teaching. Heinemann, 1996. 186 pp.

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In the history of language teaching many changes have taken place. Just in this century alone we have seen the transition from the Grammar-Translation Approach to the Direct Method to Audio-Lingualism to the Communicative Approach. In general each change is predated by a period of unrest among teachers and a growing number of professional articles criticizing the current theory. In the 50's, beginning with the writings of Noam Chomsky, the end of Audiolingualism was foretold, but it wasn't until the end of the 70's when the first textbooks using the Communicative Approach started appearing .

Nowadays, there are signs of unrest. Teachers are noticing that they are not getting the results they would like from their students—they just can't speak well, they don't know grammar, they don't want to do pairwork, etc. Just notice the talks at most conventions. How many are built around the problem of how to get students to do what they don't want to.

Maybe we're ready for a change. It's easy to say that the Communicative Approach just doesn't work. The hard part is to plan where to go next. Very little is really innovative in the teaching of languages. A study of the history of language teaching shows us that most of what we consider the "cutting edge" of teaching has been suggested before. For example, the Romans used dictation; they had texts with alphabetized vocabulary lists and narrative or conversational readings about mythology, history, fables or daily conversations. Erasmus (1466-1536) was one of the first we know of to question teaching methods. He said that the system of a language could be taught inductively through exposure to discourse and not taught. Grammar and rhetoric were the means not the end. He believed in "conversing and reading" and he recognized



three stages of language learning: (1) at home-conversation, naming and describing, (2) conversation using stories, dialogues and descriptions—increasing vocabulary without translation and little grammar training, and



(3) more reading, now studying grammar, but in context. In the 17th Century, another important educator appeared. Jan Comenius (1592-1670) was against the contemporary instruction of Latin. He said schools treated children as miniature adults. He called schools “the slaughterhouses of minds” and “Places where minds are fed on words.” He believed that teachers should understand how a child’s mind develops and

learns. He believed that understanding comes “not in the mere learning the names of things, but in the actual perception of the things themselves.” Education should begin with the child’s observation of actual objects, or models or pictures of them. He had a long list of preferred techniques: (1) use of imitation instead of rules, (2) having students repeat after the teacher, (3) use of a limited vocabulary initially, (4) helping students practice reading and speaking, (5) teaching language through pictures to make it meaningful using relevant topics. In fact, he wrote one of the first picture textbooks *The Visible World in Pictures* (1658) to teach Latin.



So, if the communicative approach as we are using it doesn’t work. What should we do?

One recent book, *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching* edited by Jane and Dave Willis (Heinemann, 1996), criticizes communicative language teaching and suggests another approach. This book is a compilation of articles by well-known researchers, including the editors, Tessa Woodward, Michael Lewis, Jim Scrivener, Martin Bygate, and Sue Wharton among others. The book is divided into five sections. The first section (*Theoretical Perspectives*) explains the stance the authors take in criticizing the Communicative Approach. It begins with an interesting article by Tessa Woodward (“*Paradigm shift and the language teaching profession*”) in which she anticipates the way the reader might react to the implications change brings with it. The second section (*Some Classroom Applications*)

offers alternatives to the existing Communicative Approach at the same time as it accentuates its weaknesses. The article (“*A flexible framework for task-based learning*”) by Jan Willis is a clear description of task-based learning and how it can be used in the classroom. The third section (*Professional Development and Teacher Training*) discusses how to change teacher training so that the less proven aspects of the Communicative Approach are not constantly propagated. Two of the best articles here are that by Jim Scrivener, who expounds a descriptive model of classroom actions (“*ARC: a descriptive model for classroom work on language*”) and that by Philip Kerr discussing how the emphasis can be taken off grammar for beginning teachers (“*Grammar for trainee teachers*”). The fourth section (*Investigating New Approaches*) includes ideas for the teacher on how to introduce innovations into their daily teaching and includes an interesting article by Martin Bygate (“*Effects of task repetition: appraising the developing language of learners*”), relating research into the effects of task repetition on student language development. The final section (*Assessing and Managing Classes*) discusses different management functions, including testing in a task-based approach.

The thread that links all these articles, is that of criticism of the methods currently used in most language classrooms. One example is Dave Willis’ article “*Accuracy, fluency and conformity*” which exemplifies this criticism. It is said that teachers consciously and consistently control the form of student responses, shaping them to the desired, often artificial end:

- T: Virginia, ask erm Sokoop, Sokoop, being erm a father. Can you ask him?
 Being a father.
 V: Er yes, er yes. Do you like being a father?
 T: Mm hm.
 S: Yes, I am...I am er father of four children.
 T: Yes, Listen to ehr question though. Say it again. Say it again.
 V: Do you like being a father?
 S: Yes I like being...to be...
 T: Mm hm. Yes.
 S: Yes, I do.
 T: Yes I do. I like being a father. (p. 45)

When Sokoop says “Yes, I am. I am the father of four children.” he is answering the question, but he isn’t using the form the teacher wants. That’s why she asks Virginia to repeat the question and continues guiding him until he answers the way she wants him to. His original answer was correct English, though, and it was even correct communication, showing his pride

in having four children. It communicated, but not the way the teacher wanted. She didn't just want accuracy, she wanted conformity.

The major criticism of Communicative Approach in this book is related to the limited nature of the PPP methodology. PPP stands for Presentation, Practice and Production. (p. v)

Presentation: Teacher highlights a form for study and contextualizes it. Learners produce form, guided by the teacher, until they can do it with consistency.

Practice: Teacher control relaxes. SS ask each other questions.

Production: A role-play, discussion or problem solving activity including the structure. Teacher control relaxed.

Some people find that the PPP sequence can be useful at specific times, but other researchers think that this method is completely useless. Peter Skehan (*“Second language acquisition research and task-based instruction”*) says:

The underlying theory for a PPP approach has now been discredited. The belief that a precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automatization (that learners will learn what is taught in the order in which it is taught) no longer carries much credibility in linguistics or psychology.” (p. v)

Skehan states that very little evidence has been found that supports the success of a PPP model and that most language learning attempts are associated with failure. In fact, many studies have shown little difference in language learning between different approaches. Also, nothing has ever proven that focus on a particular form leads to learning and that learners learn in the order in which structures are taught. Apparently learning is constrained by internal processes. You aren't just converting input into output. (p. 18)

But, although there is little evidence of the success of the PPP model, it continues to be popular. Skehan cites that “the attraction has been that to implement a PPP approach is simultaneously satisfactory for:

- the professional techniques a teacher is seen to command
- the power relations which operate within the classroom
- the role that teacher trainers have in perpetuating familiar, but outmoded, methodologies.

- the accountability mechanisms which can be seen to operate. (p. 18)

Obviously, a PPP model is easier for book writers to serve as a basis for textbook development, to teachers whose roles are clearly defined in the classroom, and to administrators who find that clearly seriated language programs are easier to organize and to test than any freer model.

So, let's throw out the communicative approach. Let's burn the textbooks. Shred the exams. Let's change...

But where are we going? Remember that historically, a period of unrest predates a radical change in teaching theory. Remember that twenty years passed between the moment Chomsky first attacked the language learning theories of his time and the publication of the first communicative textbooks. It's easy to complain, but we can't abandon everything we have now until there is somewhere to go. We need a strong model to follow if we are going to leave the communicative approach and go elsewhere.

So, maybe we are just seeing the beginning of the change. We can't abandon what we have now until the theoretical foundations are clearly laid for a new approach to be built, if one ever is. However, we can abandon the parts of our current methods which we find not to work and we can experiment with new ideas. This has to be an individual effort. Neither book writers nor institutions can experiment due to the large number of learners involved and the disastrous results that would occur if they made the wrong decisions. But, we can experiment in our classrooms. We can incorporate new ideas and try them out in a course or two. If we don't like them we can abandon them and either return to the old ways or try another new idea.

I remember when the Audio-lingual method was on its way out. We used Audio-Lingual textbooks, but we were experimenting in class with a variety of different communicative techniques—some worked and others didn't. We called it being eclectic. We were always finding new ideas in articles and at conventions. We'd share those revolutionary ideas like: pair and group work, color-cued chats, role-plays and problem solving. We knew we didn't have the answers, but we were open to new ideas. I remember one teacher who tried every new idea that came out. I can even remember when he taught an entire course in silence—mimicking the Silent Way. He was considered kind of a nut, but his students never got bored—and they never complained either.

That is what we should be doing now. Critically trying out new ideas. I say critically, because the worst thing a teacher can do is blindly jump on every bandwagon that comes by. We have to realize that most ideas are not new. We have to study our history, know where we as language teachers came from and learn from those who came before us. What didn't work years ago, probably won't work now. But if we adapt old ideas to our new situations, they might.

We also have to realize that change is coming. New ideas, and new theories will soon become everyday events. Conventions and professional journals will be full of new, inventive ideas. We must be prepared, or we will be left behind.

Reference

Kelly, L. G. 1976. *25 Centuries of Language Teaching: (An Inquiry into the Science, Art and Development of Language Teaching: 500 B.C.-1969)*. Newbury House.