A Review and Renovation of Language Teaching Methodology

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Abstract: The overall focus is how Michael Byram’s work on (inter)cultural competence can renovate foreign language teaching methodology in the 21st century. The first section briefly reviews a few popular approaches in language teaching in recent decades, noting their deficiencies. The next section outlines perspectives of three eminent language scholars, Andy Kirkpatrick, Claire Kramsch and Michael Byram, about language teaching and culture. This helps to frame advice for enhanced foreign language teaching methodology in the final section. There are three main suggestions how language teaching methodology should evolve. First, it must be relevant and effective in our dynamic world, where English is a global language, often used as a lingua franca for communication within and among cultures. Another recommendation is that it needs to realign from a focus on grammar and language structure to a broader perspective incorporating (inter)cultural (para)linguistic and pragmatic content. Thirdly, teaching should promote higher level cognitive processing so that learners can express their opinions and culture in more analytical and meaningful ways through a shared (foreign) language. Suggestions are aimed to help educators improve their course design and also to reinvigorate their teaching methods.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, Communicative competence, Methodology, Assessment.

1. Introduction

In practical ways, this paper suggests how Michael Byram’s work on (inter)cultural communicative competence can renovate foreign language teaching methodology in the 21st century. Initially, there is a brief review of popular approaches in language teaching in recent decades, including the Present, Practice, Produce (PPP) method, shadowing and the notional functional approach. Although such teaching methods allow learners to pronounce English words, to form and perhaps understand English sentences, the first two methods in particular, are not focused on awareness of and sensitivity towards cultural aspects of language production with speakers from different cultures. The opinion expressed here is that these three approaches are disadvantageous if consistently applied as a predominant teaching method because they are geared towards language (structure) proficiency rather than teaching intercultural competence. There is an outline of some aspects of English language teaching from the perspective of three eminent contemporary scholars. In particular, Michael Byram’s recommendations offer practical and relevant ways to realign methodology, from a focus on teaching language structures to expanding teacher and learner awareness of their own culture.
and also proficiency when communicating in various intercultural contexts. Among various suggestions for assessing intercultural competence is to score language production activities which stimulate higher level cognitive processing.

2. Deficiencies of Popular Language Teaching Approaches

This section briefly reviews three popular language teaching methods in recent decades: Present, Practice, Produce (PPP), shadowing and the notional functional approach. If teachers are to renovate and reinvigorate what they do, there needs to be active and ongoing self-evaluation of course aims, teaching content and methodology.

The Present, Practice, Produce (PPP) method has long been used to teach points of grammar and to practice syntax. It could be described more critically as a simplistic teaching method rather than one effective for learning (see Case, 2008). The idea that learning occurs in a set sequence of present, practice and then produce does not necessarily prepare learners for the complexities of real-time communicative interaction. Short-term use of the PPP method can introduce learners to elements of communicative acts in another language. However, teachers might restrict content for practice to what they perceive to be expected, standard utterances. Although Kirkpatrick (2010, 2012) would perhaps not challenge using the PPP method per se, he believes that native (English) speakers often do not speak in standard forms. This presents a methodological issue whether or not to present non-standard forms to (especially elementary) language learners.

Another popular language teaching and learning method is shadowing, whereby learners repeat what they hear as they listen. Advantages of this method are limited to the context of pronunciation. These include a learner’s ability to practice speaking anywhere and at any time convenient for them and also that it can help learners to practice the prosodic elements of a foreign language. An important criticism though is that learners do not actively process meaning and engage in any real communicative interaction. Learners cannot exchange opinions or meaningful information on their own terms. Moreover, this method does not deal with specific aims of (inter)cultural awareness or ability to communicate flexibly in meaningful cross-cultural communication.

Since the 1970s, a notional functional approach has been commonly used when teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and also English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This approach has been catered to by a vast range of textbook series that present learners with grammar-based themes to practice English, using the four macro skills. Many contemporary English language textbooks continue a notional functional approach to language teaching. This is evidenced from a common first unit theme of 'Introductions' to other themes and
functions of everyday interactions such as ordering food, giving directions, making reservations, shopping and offering advice. This approach to language teaching focuses on very practical language use. As such, it involves the situations, participants, time, topics and activities in which learners might engage, where English is a lingua franca, either in their own or perhaps a foreign culture setting. However, valuable time can be wasted by starting each course with students 'learning' introductions. In a Japanese context, this is unnecessary given at least ten terms of English education before learners reach their first year of university study and this is why some English language textbooks are produced for 'false beginners'. Nevertheless, at university level, teachers continue to teach such themes as 'giving directions', introducing vocabulary and engaging students in reading simple maps and pair work activities. Such exercises are assumed to be of practical significance for the student in case a foreigner asks them for directions in their own country or they need to ask in another country. In reality, such a task is usually and significantly paralinguistic. The person giving directions will initially orient their body in the direction of the goal location. Then there is pointing and also hand gestures to indicate direction. It is this, arguably more than the details of verbal expression that convey meaning and allow comprehension. Moreover, technology now provides easy access to detailed maps on hand-held internet wifi devices that effectively do away with any need to ask for directions. Similarly, teachers engage students in activities where they order food and drinks in restaurants. In reality, again, there is usually paralinguistic behaviour, such as pointing at a menu, holding up fingers to indicate the number of drinks and so on, which does not require much linguistic proficiency.

It is not a criticism here to claim deficiencies of the notional functional approach as such. Criticism is aimed at teachers who blindly apply this approach assuming that ‘real life’ foreign language use exists in neatly defined contexts and where learners can effectively communicate with a defined range of expressions learned for a particular situation. This assumption effectively trivialises language teaching through its compartmentalising of interactive scenarios. Although the content and methodology of the common notional functional approach can play a useful role in introducing aspects of speech and communication, it is perhaps a more appropriate way of teaching ESL, or EFL in elementary schools, junior and senior high schools. In contrast, the nature of university education as one of advanced-level academic study should feature language courses with much more deliberate focus on culture, rather than those with isolated lesson-by-lesson themes and content restricted to ‘pronunciation’ or ‘grammar’.

3. Perspectives of Three Eminent Scholars

This section outlines some of the views of language teaching and learning (also see Michael Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, & Colby, n.d.). The following summary comes from three
eminent scholars: Andy Kirkpatrick, Claire Kramsch and Michael Byram. The content featured in their plenary speeches and respective printed materials from language conferences in the latter half of 2012. The aim is not to critically compare their differing views, but mainly to provide an academic context to highlight aspects of teaching intercultural competence from the perspectives of Michael Byram; refer table 1. His views form the basis of the advice offered in section 4, how teachers can renovate and reinvigorate their language teaching methods.

3.1 Focus of Language Teaching
The focus of language teaching, as suggested by Kirkpatrick (2012) involves being able to communicate immediate ‘here and now’ needs well enough so that speakers can talk about what they want in ELF at any given time. Kramsch (2012) clearly prefers teaching for a higher level of linguistic proficiency so that what learners say is more structurally accurate. The key for Byram (2012) is for both an increased teacher and learner awareness of and sensitivity to a wide range of important communicative contexts. This extends to learners being able to analyse and avoid communication breakdown, or to develop strategies to repair problems in real time. This entails goals of being a spontaneous communication ‘manager’, aware of respective cultural conventions, able to listen and respond in meaningful, appropriate and respectful ways in a variety of communicative contexts.

3.2 What Learners Do
Byram suggests that when speakers communicate, they do so as individuals, not culturally ‘packaged’ representatives. This means that not all Japanese, for example, know how to make sushi or origami, play the koto, know all about sumo or the tea ceremony and how to wear a kimono. Nationality becomes incidental and cultural practices appear less universal when individuals discuss their own experiences, feelings and opinions. This also helps to break

Table 1. Perspectives on Language Teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scholar</th>
<th>Kirkpatrick</th>
<th>Kramsch</th>
<th>Byram</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education goal</td>
<td>Communicative competence</td>
<td>Symbolic competence</td>
<td>(inter)cultural competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of language teaching</td>
<td>Teach learners how to communicate well enough for their immediate needs.</td>
<td>Teach learners to communicate accurately and eloquently.</td>
<td>Teach learners to be aware of how they communicate within and between cultures.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What learners do: A goal is mutual intelligibility to achieve shared communicative goals. Learners learn culture from awareness of dissecting cultural layers from cultural (con)texts. Learners talk about everyday life, possibly to compare with that of other cultures.

Pronunciation, grammar and syntax: Mutual speaker intelligibility is key. Production accuracy is a goal. Secondary to aims of cultural awareness and sensitivity.

Pragmatics: Acceptable if comprehensible. Unacceptable though comprehensible. Appropriacy: what/where/how/to whom we should (not) say or do.

Language and culture: Teaching language means helping learners to explain knowledge and culture in their own terms using ELF. Teaching language means access to culture through skillful use of layers of semiotic meaning. Teaching language means teaching culture. Teach cultural content.

Assessing cultural proficiency: Possible to do but not a focus. Questionable whether we can or should do it. Possible to do. It can be a focus, despite issues and complexities.

down cultural stereotypes, when for example, speakers explain what they or their families do, in contrast to much broader cultural strokes that might be the perception of others. Although a typical Japanese New Year custom is to visit three shrines to pray for good luck, it is nevertheless a fact that hundreds of thousands of Japanese travel abroad at that time of year. This does not mean that these travellers are not typical Japanese, nor that they are unaware of usual Japanese New Year customs.

### 3.3 Pronunciation, Grammar and Syntax

Kirkpatrick is adamant that teachers should not waste valuable class time being pedantic, by focusing on the pronunciation of minimal pairs, fossilised mistakes or the omission of ‘s’ at the end of words. He questions the point of trying to overcome this linguistic ‘hardwiring’ except where pronunciation impedes comprehension. One example of misunderstanding could occur from the modification of final ‘l’ sounds to ‘n’ in Thai, where ‘bill’ becomes ‘bin’. In
the context of romance, if a native Japanese speaker were to utter “I rub you”, it would most likely be interpreted as “I love you”, considering the illocutionary force of such a statement. Therefore, learners should be made aware of not only what they hear and say, but also of their intended message. Alternatively, Kramsch believes that accuracy is noticed and appreciated and that learners should strive for rhetorical eloquence. Their proficiency then extends to an ability to sound ‘cool’ and fashionable in a natural way. Regarding the prosodic elements of speech, grammar and syntax, Bryam probably has the least overall focus of the three scholars, with a proficiency goal for learners to become more culturally (self)aware and sensitive to speakers from other cultural contexts.

3.4 Pragmatics
The example provided here is “Mister, where you go?”, a commonly heard utterance in Thailand. Notwithstanding grammaticality, Kirkpatrick would accept this as a valid question because it is comprehensible. The listener is likely to understand that this is a style of greeting for which a general, rather than specific answer is suitable. Furthermore, he emphasises that almost all native English speakers do not speak standard forms of English. This means that the utterance of a native English speaker, such as “They aint done nothing wrong”, or “No have” for a non-native speaker, though unconventional are nevertheless effective because they are comprehensible.

On the other hand, Kramsch would think that such utterances are sloppy and undesirable. She believes that speakers need to be credible, more than just comprehensible because those who do not communicate accurately are taken less seriously. She thinks it is better to speak less, but speak well rather than to speak more and to do so poorly, even if communicative goals are achieved effectively. Overall, Byram would suggest that learners should be aware of appropriate (and also inappropriate) contexts, timing, gestures and utterances. Pragmatic competence is therefore an important component of intercultural competence.

3.5 Teaching and Assessing Cultural Competence
Byram believes that teaching language means teaching culture, such is their integral relationship. Nevertheless, one of the difficulties associated with planning and teaching courses in cultural competency is the nature of learner assessment. This is owing to the subjective course content and the fact that in a number of ways it is problematic to assess attitudes. One problem is that attitudes change over time and with related exposure to cultures through experience. Another obstacle is how to score attitudes, given that learners should not feel obliged to respond in particular ways. There is also the question of whether attitudes can or should be assessed at all.
One suggested activity for practice and possible assessment (Byram 2000) is for learners to create a portfolio where they can describe their (intercultural) experiences, including how they felt at the time. Such descriptions could be based on personal experience, or for example, from material they view on television or the internet. A goal is for learners to explain aspects of their experience including the way/s that culture can create problems with interaction, possibly causing communication breakdown. Further to this, Byram (2000) suggests that learners engage in reflective analysis of their own intercultural experiences. They could then write or talk about these experiences and possibly suggest ways their problems were (or could have been) overcome. Teachers can assess the proficiency of responses according to definable criteria such as lexical range, syntax, coherency and so on. The teacher then is effectively not assessing the attitudes, feelings and beliefs of learners per se, but can comment on both the linguistic and cultural content that learners produce. Teachers can provide students with constructive feedback as to how they can express themselves better in oral or written practice.

4. To Renovate and Reinvigorate Language Teaching Methodology

This section offers three main points of advice, incorporating some ideas of Byram (2000, 2012) with the aim to suggest how language teaching methodology should evolve with focused planning and practice.

4.1 Teach Culture Through Content

First, if we assume that language teaching aims to produce ‘global citizens’, learners need to learn about the world. This means that teachers should not be afraid to teach content beyond points of pronunciation and grammar. However, it does not necessitate teaching controversial or complex (cultural) topics. Too often, teachers either consciously or inadvertently present content neatly packaged into isolated, perhaps unrelated personal topics. This is one of the criticisms of the notional functional approach previously discussed. Teachers should avoid stereotypical, superficial, sporadic and ad hoc approaches to teaching content such as the following listed by Hadley (1993, p. 360).

1. The Frankenstein Approach - a geisha from here, a temple from there, a karaoke bar from here, a hot spring from there.
3. The Tour Guide Approach - the identification of geographical features such as mountains, rivers and cities.
4. The “By-the-Way” Approach - promoting an “Us and Them” mentality with an incidental presentation of information that emphasises cultural differences. One of the reasons that teachers (even inadvertently) choose these approaches is because of the format of textbooks. Teaching high quality, meaningful cultural content does not necessitate presenting information from a textbook. With reference to knowledge (saviors) explained by Byram, Gribkova and
Starkey (2002, p. 8), meaningful content can be generated by learners within and between a series of lessons as they examine how language is used within and among cultures.

4.2 Teach Skills of Discovery and Interaction
Language teaching methodology needs to realign from a focus on grammar and language structure to a broader perspective incorporating (inter)cultural (para)linguistic and pragmatic content. Teachers should prepare materials and activities that focus learner attention on various aspects of communicative experience relating to interaction between and among individuals and also as expressions of more generalized cultural practices. This exemplifies ‘skills of discovery and interaction (savoir apprendre/faire)’ (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, 2002, p. 8). For example, in a carefully structured sequence of lessons, learners can write about a cross-cultural communication problem from their experience and then for speaking practice, prepare picture cards to explain that problem, why it occurred and suggest how such a problem might be avoided. This can be done as an individual or small group practice and also involves active peer listening in English. Teaching methodology can be more relevant and effective when learners actively engage in activities that encourage them to talk about their communication experiences.

4.3 Encourage Higher Level Cognitive Processing
Thirdly, teaching should promote higher level cognitive processing so that learners can develop a more analytical approach to communication. One goal is for students to express their opinions about culture in considered, even profound ways through a shared (foreign) language. The learner’s ability to explain the importance of cultural practices can be a valid means of assessing cultural competence. Teachers should accept the validity of learner opinions and provide guidance as to how they can express themselves more appropriately. This is part of critical cultural awareness (savoir s'engager) (Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, 2002, p. 9). Although teachers might balk at how to present culture topics, higher level cognitive processes do not necessitate complex language production. It is quite possible for learners to indicate their ability to analyse and critique in simple ways. Importantly, learners should be asked to think about and produce language that extends far beyond basic descriptions, likes and preferences. Their thought processes need to involve imagination and flexibility. For example, if discussing forms of entertainment popular in their country, learners should be taught how they can talk about how television might change in the future (speculation), or how television programs can be an effective source of education (evaluation). In terms of promoting overall language proficiency, learners should be encouraged to develop topics, to be able to talk about something and respond in appropriate, meaningful ways as communicative acts become extended.
5. Conclusion

For more than a decade, the work of Michael Byram has suggested how aims of purposefully teaching and assessing cultural content to foreign language learners can be achieved. Whereas traditional assessment has focused on language output, rating the learner’s macro-skill proficiency, a broader perspective is offered for teaching culture beyond linguistic forms. To renovate language planning and teaching, conventional learner outcomes might not be the criteria for assessment, but instead, the ways in which students cognitively process content and how they express their views to demonstrate an acquired appreciation of various points of culture. The views of three eminent scholars helps to contextualise and also to highlight how teachers can approach the way they deal with specific cultural content and assessment. To reinvigorate foreign language methodology, the final advice offered is to have fun. Teach content that you enjoy and share your enthusiasm with learners. Both teaching and learning should be an enjoyable experience that motivates and encourages participation. Thanks to the work of scholars such as Michael Byram, frameworks for teaching and assessing culture can make an important contribution to teacher training, professional reflection and a reassessment of language teaching goals and methods. A goal for learners to explain in another language what various aspects of culture mean to them and why these are important is of no minor educational significance. This more than justifies the teaching of focused cultural topics within a second language curriculum.

References


