

NEW PUBLICATIONS

David Nunan. 1995. *Language teaching methodology: A textbook for teachers*. Phoenix ELT. 264pp.

H Douglas Brown. 1994. *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. Prentice Hall Regents. 467pp.

These two volumes could usefully constitute companion volumes. Brown's book offers appropriate pre-service prescribed material, while Nunan's represents a sound and stimulating form of continuing education for teachers.

Both subscribe to teacher education rather than teacher training, seeing internal development as crucial. Each in his own way sets out to stimulate and continue internal development by providing an external resource that will enhance this process.

It is not surprising, then, that both are concerned to free teachers from the constraints and strictures of teaching according to prescription. On page 49 of his book, Brown explains

[v]irtually all language teaching methods make the oversimplified assumption that what teachers 'do' in the classroom can be conventionalized into a set of procedures that fits all contexts. We are all too aware that such is clearly not the case (p. 49).

Nunan is more pointed in his rejection of method:

Despite their diversity, all methods have one thing in common. They all assume that there is a single set of principles that will determine whether or not learning will take place. Thus they all assume that there is a single set of precepts for teacher and learner classroom behaviour, and assert that if these principles are faithfully followed, they will result in learning for all. Unfortunately, little evidence has been forthcoming to support one approach rather than another, or to suggest that it is the method rather than some other variable that caused learning to occur (p. 3).

[W]e have yet to devise a method that is capable of teaching anybody anything (p. 248).

Both authors are concerned that teachers adopt a principled approach:

Everything a teacher says or does in the classroom is the result of conscious or subconscious choices among many alternatives. Most of these choices are - or should be - the result of a careful consideration of a whole host of underlying principles of second language learning and teaching (Brown, p.4).

[L]anguage teaching methodology needs to be placed on a more secure empirical footing. Materials, learning tasks and pedagogical exercises need to be based not on ideology or dogma, as is too often the case now, but on evidence and insights into what constitutes effective language teaching. I have tried to show that a considerable body of knowledge exists and can be readily exploited by materials designers and methodologists (Nunan, p. 15).

Designed for those who have done 'little or no previous work in linguistics or second language acquisition', Brown's book is divided into four parts: *Foundation for classroom practice*, *Contexts of teaching*, *Designing and implementing classroom techniques* and *Classroom practicalities*. The chapters which comprise each of the parts are simply and engagingly written with topics for discussion, action or research at the end of each of them.

The first chapter of *Foundations for classroom practice* (Where do I begin?) establishes Brown's ability to recognise and address the real needs of his audience. His interactive style invites participation. He then skilfully illustrates his belief that teaching involves a series of choices by analysing every event in a particular lesson. In order to do so, he first lists each event in the sequence in which it occurs. A corresponding list of questions makes it possible for the reader to see what choice(s) have been made at every point in the sequence and to reflect on them. For example, Brown supplies the following set of questions on sequence [6], which involves pair work (preceded by teacher modelling) with the teacher circulating and offering one or two comments:

[6] Is this too soon for pair work? Before the pair work, why did T model questions and responses? Was that sufficient for all students, even those with lower than average proficiency? If some of the pairs are silent, why should T do? If only one person in a pair is talking, is that okay? If not, how can a T get both partners to talk? What if they talk to each other in their native language?

The rest of Part 1 provides essential background information on classroom practice (Teaching by principles; Intrinsic motivation in the classroom; A methodological history of language teaching; The present informed approach). His writing style encourages interaction, as the selection from page 40 illustrates.

Ultimately, the product of this system is a person who has been taught to fear failure above all and therefore to refrain from potentially rewarding risk-taking or innovative behavior.

A bleak picture? Too harsh? Of course, there are many happy exceptions to such a depiction, but you don't have to look very far in any corner of the world to find major elements of the picture holding true. The question is: can something be done to turn the picture upside down?

The text sound and informative, but jargon-free text is illustrated throughout by concrete examples. There are also a number of clear summaries in the form of tables and charts, some

of which are drawn from other sources, for example: *Approaches and Methods - an Overview* taken from Nunan 1989.

Part II (*Contexts of Teaching*) focuses on learner variables (adult and children) as well as proficiency levels and sociopolitical and institutional contexts. Advice given is simple and generally practical. However, the issues involved are complex, so this section is not entirely satisfactory. Disappointingly, for instance, Brown adopts a strong Piagetian position, arguing for an exclusively 'here and now' approach to be taken with young children. Perhaps, not surprisingly the chapter on sociopolitical and institutional contexts is the least satisfactory. Critical pedagogists will find much to be critical of: complex issues such as 'which variety of English to teach?' are not happily reduced to brief treatment.

In Part Three (*Designing and Implementing Techniques*), having described the background against which choices are made, comprehensive attention is given to traditional areas such as listening comprehension, oral communication skills, reading, writing, learning strategies and testing as well as to the nature of interactive teaching. Although the text is simply written, it is usually sound and comprehensive. It summarises seminal works and provides concrete illustrations of learning material. His approach in each case invites reflection and constant weighing of options against the objectives of communicative language teaching.

It is unfortunate, however, that a section that in many ways has every right to invite users to have confidence in what it offers, contains at least one glaring error. In the chapter on reading, Brown quite erroneously presents Goodman as a proponent of bottom-up reading and describes the approach advocated by schema theoreticians as top-down.

Part IV (*Classroom Practicalities*) deals with some of the basic problems students in the HDE year find most difficult: planning an appropriate lesson and putting it into effect. The advice given is concrete and realistic and yet, at the same time, simple enough for all HDE students to use as self-access material. At no stage, however, does Brown succumb to the temptation to degenerate to the level of 'tips for teachers'.

Nunan's book is organised along traditional lines, covering areas such as listening, reading, speaking, writing, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, learning strategies, classroom management, teacher-student interaction, and materials development. In the last chapter, he provides a description and at times trenchant critique of some of the 'more prominent methods'. His purpose in doing so is to illustrate the shortcomings of a dependence on method and the dangers of being seduced by ideology. For him the crucial insight to be gained is that 'individual classroom exercises and techniques need to be derived in the first instance from a consideration of the purposes to which the language will potentially be put, and the functions it will perform' (p. 248).

In keeping with the notion of knowledge construction, Nunan recommends that the first five chapters be dealt with sequentially since they develop a model of language and learning. The reader is invited to engage in an interactive and reflective process of construction using these five chapters as a point of reference for developing and extending his or her methodological repertoire. However, there is a danger that Nunan's crisp style may allow this invitation to be

forgotten, and the material he presents for discussion and reflection may be taken as authoritative.

An important feature of the book is that it reflects Nunan's firm belief in a central role for the teacher. He argues against the notion of teachers as consumers of the research results produced by researchers in favour of teachers' adopting an 'empirically-based approach to language teaching methodology [that] integrates theory and research into the nature of language learning and use, with insights derived from the observation and analysis of what actually goes on in classrooms (as opposed to what some say should go on).

Nunan's wide knowledge of theory and practice is evident in the careful selection that has been made of seminal as well as thought provoking articles. Not only teachers interested in extending their understanding and knowledge of the different areas of second language methodology, but also teacher educators will benefit will find this book offers a sound and comprehensive guide to current thinking. In each case the initial sections in the chapter provide an overview of the theory and research which have been used as a basis for teaching approaches, task design and materials development, and readers are directed throughout to the articles which provide more detail on specific aspects.

As Nunan suggests, the initial sections could be read individually before group discussion and analysis of the classroom extracts and illustrative teaching tasks and materials. There is also a series of action research tasks which would make it possible to explore the ideas in a specific teaching context. I found the pre- and post-reading tasks most valuable analytical tools, skilfully facilitating the process of interactive interpretation. Since most of this material has been used in courses, users of the book will have the benefit of a rich source of material for self-study, in-service courses or even research projects that has been tried and tested. It would make an invaluable addition to any thinking teacher's shelf.

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