A CRITICAL REVIEW OF SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS BOOKS

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Introduction

The purpose of the review is two-fold. The first purpose is to serve as a reference for general ESL/EFL methods teachers and educators. The second is to serve as a starting point for our future teaching since upon our graduation we may be responsible for teaching a methods course and the like to graduate students in the TESL/TEFL program at our home universities—Mahasarakam University and Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand. We anticipate that most of our students will be in-service English teachers at high school and college levels from northeastern Thailand where our universities are located. As English language users, they may not necessarily have any experience living in the countries where English is spoken as a first language and are likely to have limited opportunities to use the language outside of classrooms. Regarding their educational backgrounds, many of them may graduate from local teacher's colleges while some may graduate from universities with such related degrees as English Literature or Linguistics, but with no extensive training in language teaching methodology. Hence, we speculate that our future students will have diverse backgrounds in teacher training and for that reason our methods course would be a challenge.

In this paper we present a critical review of two methods books, namely, *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (3rd ed.) (2001), and *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (3rd

ed.) (2001). It should be noted that in our original review, we selected and reviewed six methods books. However, due to the limited space and the desire to suggest the most appropriate texts for a methods course, we have chosen only two texts to discuss in this paper. We will begin by defining the word "methods," and then explain what criteria we used for our review and how we selected and analyzed the texts. The findings, discussion, and conclusion will then follow respectively.

Methodology

Defining methods

The very first step we took is to define what we mean by methods books. After a long debate we decided to adopt Oller's definition of *methods*. According to Oller (1993), *methods* are "anything and everything from classroom realia and props to curriculum, games, activities, tests, and whatever else it takes to move a class full of people (or a single individual) from not knowing a language very well to knowing it a good deal better. Method connects theory with practice, and vice versa" (p. 2).

Setting the criteria for review

Since Methods books are to be used in methods courses, we consulted Grosse (1993, 1991) for a list of topics taught in American methods courses based on her questionnaires completed by major U.S. graduate programs in TESOL. Examples of topics include culture, language skills, and assessment. Although we found that Grosse's list is helpful, some of the topics on the list are not defined. These topics are *methods* and *professional development*. Adopting the list as a guideline, we thus feel the need to give a brief functional definition of each term. We decided to use the term *teaching methods* instead of *methods* used by Grosse because we already reserved *methods* as an umbrella term for teaching methodology defined earlier. We refer to *teaching methods* as *a process* and *manner* in which 1) a linguistic input is delivered to learners, and 2) a linguistic output is produced by learners. Examples of teaching methods are the Audiolingual Method, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response (TPR), and Silent

Way. We also included *approaches* as one of our criteria to contrast with *teaching methods.* We follow Richards & Rodgers (2001) who assert, "*approach* refers to theories about the nature of language and language learning that serves as the source of practices and principles in language teaching" (p. 20). Having said this, we see teaching methods operating at a practical level whereas approaches operating at a theoretical or conceptual level. With regards to *professional development,* we consider it to be any effort or scheme aiding teachers to develop their expertise in both teaching and intellect. Thus, *professional development* can be in the form of conducting research, developing teaching materials, critiquing theories, reflecting on their own practices, or even simply sharing their teaching experiences with fellow teachers.

Selecting texts

We began the text selection process by conducting an Internet search for textbooks adopted by TESOL methods courses and browsing language teaching textbook collections. We selected texts which were 1) widely adopted among the methods courses, 2) available for review, and 3) up-to-date. This step yielded six methods books for review. However, as mentioned previously, we have chosen to present only two books in this report.

Analyzing texts

We created a checklist of topics by adapting Grosse's list (1993, 1991). Since checking for a presence of topics does not inform us of the quality of the topic discussion, as we worked through each criterion, we took note of the amount of discussion in each topic. For example, if a text discusses the role of culture in second/ foreign language teaching, we further asked the questions of to what extent and how the book addresses such role. We used this note to help make a recommendation for text adoption.

Findings

To provide a thorough discussion of findings we will present our findings in two formats: an annotated bibliography of the

reviewed books and a tabulated summary of checklist results in respective order. The first part of the annotated bibliography presents brief facts about the reviewed books and the second part is devoted to their critique.

Celce-Murcia, M. (Ed.). (2001). *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

Many experts in the field of ESL/EFL in one area or another have contributed to the compilation of the chapters in *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* or also known as *The Apple Book*. This collection is divided into five units. At the beginning of each unit, the editor gives a one paragraph summary of what each chapter within the unit is about. The first unit deals with approaches and methods of language teaching from past to present. The second unit covers the teaching of the four language skills, grammar, and vocabulary. The third unit focuses on integrated approaches in language teaching, such as content-based, experiential and negotiated, and bilingual approaches. The fourth unit is devoted to issues related to the learners. The last unit mentions the skills and knowledge one should have to become an effective, up-to-date teacher.

It is evident that the editor makes this book comprehensive by including a wide range of topics from those dealing with teaching methods to teachers' professional development. As shown in the following table, the criteria that we look for in a language methods course textbook can mostly be found in this collection. Motivation and attitudes are the only issue not addressed. A positive feature of this anthology is that almost all authors provide theoretical backgrounds before discussing each issue in detail. This is of importance in building the basis for understanding the topic at hand, which our future students may not be familiar with before. For example, the chapter on teaching grammar contributed by Larson-Freeman outlines insights gained from second language acquisition research (SLA) on students' learning processes. The understanding of this process can help the teacher to make better selection as to which teaching methods and lesson sequence would be most suitable for the students.

Another strength of this book is the fact that it highlights professional development. Justifications as to why teachers should get involved in language classroom research are provided. Also, ways in which teachers can be better-informed in their profession are suggested. An extensive list of professional associations and organizations, relevant journals, clearinghouses/centers, publishers, and internet resources are given to inform the teachers of all the resources they "can exploit to keep abreast of new developments" (p. 401). The book also dedicates several chapters to issues facing ESL practitioners in North America.

This book, as mentioned earlier, lacks substantial discussion on motivation and attitudes as external factors in language learning, which we deemed crucial to the success of second language learning. Additionally, some of the topics mentioned in this volume may not be readily applicable to our teaching context in Thailand. For instance, Hawkin's chapter on children's content learning and language development in kindergarten – 5th grade talks about how teachers can support their learning of second language while studying the content in their second language environment. In our context, however, English is considered a foreign language. It is taught as a separate subject on its own in a foreign language environment. Other content subjects such as math and science are taught in Thai.

In sum, this volume is ideal for readers seeking an overview on topics in TESOL methods, presented in a concise, reader-friendly language. If further in-depth information is needed, one can refer to the annotated bibliography and websites listed at the end of each chapter.

Harmer, J. (2001). *The practice of English language teaching* **(3rd ed.). Essex, England: Longman.**

The book is divided into nine parts and consists of twenty-four chapters. The first part, titled *Language,* deals with the English language in terms of its place in today's world, its linguistic features, and its use. The second part describes issues related to learners and teachers. Concerning learners, in

particular, are the issues of age, learner differences, and motivation. As for teachers, the main discussion is on different roles that teachers can play in English language classrooms. Part Three is concerned with popular teaching approaches, methods, techniques, and theories behind them. In the fourth part of the book, classroom management is discussed, particularly the various ways in grouping students and what some behavioral problems teachers might encounter are and how teachers should handle them. In Part Five, the author focuses on issues related to language study. *Language study*, as defined by Harmer, "refers to any stage in a lesson where students and teachers focus in on (the construction of) a specific feature of the language in order to understand it better" (p. 154). Descriptions of techniques and choices of language study activities are presented. Part Six deals with the teaching of receptive and productive skills. The seventh part is devoted to syllabus design, lesson planning, and textbook evaluation. Part Eight deals with evaluation, emphasizing on the different types of tests and test items, and how to write and mark tests. The last part of the book deals with promoting learner autonomy and teacher development.

The book addresses most of the criteria that we are looking for in a methods book. Its several chapters discuss linguistic properties of English and the teaching of various components of language in isolation. The author emphasizes the teaching of all four skills, namely, reading, listening, writing, and speaking by dedicating an entire chapter on each one. What is missing, however, is the integration of the four skills. This book serves as a good reference for the various popular teaching approaches and methods since it provides quite detailed description of each, such as Audiolingual Method (ALM), presentation-practice-production (PPP), communicative language teaching (CLT), and TPR, to name a few. Another salient feature of this book is that it mentions a great deal on learners' learning styles and strategies and factors influencing them. In addition, it includes an extensive discussion on teacher beliefs and roles.

In general, the book is reader-friendly in the sense that it is written in 'ordinary language,' making it easy to understand what the writer is trying to express although it uses a great deal of

linguistic terminology. Another reader-friendly aspect of the book is that it contains plenty of examples in each of the topics mentioned. The author provides a list of further readings, mostly with short descriptions at the end of each chapter. This is helpful for readers who want to delve into a particular topic. Furthermore, the explicit division of the book into parts, chapters, and subheadings within each chapter makes it easy for the readers to follow the content. However, a couple of the topics appear to be out of sequence. For instance, we think Chapter Seven on learner errors and feedback should be in Part Eight on evaluation, but instead, it is included in Part Three which is concerned with theories, methods, and techniques in teaching.

Table 1: Summary of checklist review results

Topics	Celce-Murcia (2001)	Harmer (2001)
Theories and approaches	√	√
Teaching methods	√	√
Vocabulary	√	√
Grammar	√	√
Writing	√	√
Speaking	√	√
Reading	√	√
Listening	√	√
Integration of the four skills	√	X
Technologies	√	√
Culture	√	√
Materials evaluation	√	√
Teaching and learning context	√	√

Accuracy and errors	√	√
Assessment	√	√
Motivation and attitudes	X	√
Learning styles and strategies	√	√
Classroom management	√	√
Lesson planning	√	√
Syllabus design	√	√
Teacher beliefs and roles	√	√
Professional development	√	√

Remarks: √ = present; X = absent

Discussion

We look at our critique of each book and become aware that there is no such thing as a perfect methods book. We think that both of the books are valuable and will make good references for a general English methods course. It is difficult for us to decide which one is the best for a general methods course because both seem to cover most of what we look for. Similarly, focusing on our future teaching context in Thailand in which our students are mainly in-service high school or college levels teachers, if we had to make a choice of which book to adopt, we would consider adopting both Celce-Murcia (2001) and Harmer (2001). They compliment each other in the sense that any topic not mentioned in *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* is addressed in *The Practice of English Language Teaching* and vice versa.

Although both books cover theory and practice, a close look at the contents of each book shows that Celce-Murcia (2001) leans more toward theoretical and philosophical issues in second and foreign language instruction, but Harmer (2001) is more pedagogy-oriented. While we appreciate theoretical components in Celce-Murcia (2001), we feel that it might be a challenge to readers who do not have background knowledge of SLA theories. On the other hand, Harmer (2001) refers to SLA theories mainly to support

teaching methods and approaches being presented. As its title suggests, a large portion of this volume is devoted to the very teaching activities that ESL/EFL teachers can readily use in classrooms.

Apart from the differences in contents, both volumes also differ in writing styles. *The Practice of English Language Teaching* being written by one author, gives a flow to the content although there is a minute discrepancy addressed earlier. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* is contributed by several authors who bring in not only different areas of ESL/EFL research paradigm, but also writing styles.

Despite the differences, both books have a lot in common when it comes to topics of discussion. This is evidenced in the checklist provided in the table above. For example, they both address our most pertinent concerns—teaching context, teaching methods, and teacher's beliefs and roles. The crucial element of teaching in a foreign language context is the limited amount of linguistic input available to students, it is important to keep in mind that whatever methods that work in a second language setting that rely on input interaction may or may not work well in our setting. The other concern regarding our teaching context is the fact that most EFL programs are geared toward English for specific purposes, particularly English for academic purposes. These two concerns are very well addressed in Celce-Murcia (2001). When discussing TESOL teaching methods, both Harmer (2001) and Celce-Murcia (2001) provide detailed and straightforward description of popular methods with theories underpinning them. We appreciate this value because our students, despite the fact that they are language teachers, are learners as well. They struggle with English at times. Providing them with simple English to explain sophisticated terminology not only help them understand theories and practices better but also empower them in terms of their ability to understand the complexity of the field through English, which otherwise might not be accessible to them.

Regarding teachers' beliefs and roles, we were made aware of these issues by Saengboon (2002) who illustrates several

examples of a mismatch between what Thai teachers believe with regard to theories and what they actually do in classrooms. In his study of Thai EFL teachers' beliefs about the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Approach, Saengboon found that some teachers articulated beliefs resonant with the CLT tenets in their interview. Nonetheless, when observed in classrooms, they either did most of the talking or never used a target language during the teaching time, thus violating student autonomy and linguistic input which are ones of the core tenets of CLT. Hence, we felt it is very important to ensure that Thai teachers reflect on their beliefs and roles as part of their teaching practice. Celce-Murcia (2001) addresses teachers' beliefs under the topics entitled *Reflective Teaching in ELT* in which teachers explore how they perceive themselves and are perceived by students through various tools (e.g. teacher assessment surveys, retrospective field notes). The other thought-provoking chapter is the one that encourages non-native speaking teachers to think of themselves positively by exploring how being a non-native speaker contributes to their teaching, dispelling the myth that only native-speaking teachers make a good language teacher. With regard to teacher roles, Harmer (2001) does a good job in devoting an entire chapter on this topic. For Harmer, teachers can take as negative a role as a controller as well as positive ones such as a prompter, a participant, a resource, and an observer. By describing these roles Harmer brings to our attention that whatever teachers do affects the dynamics of their classroom and they should be flexible with their roles. According to our experience, a number of Thai teachers tend to identify themselves with only one role—authority figure, which we think is sometimes detrimental to students' involvement and learning in the classroom.

Conclusion

In this report we have reviewed two methods books in light of general methods course expectations and our teaching expectations. We found that the two books have their strengths and weaknesses but both of them are well worth reading. Celce-Murcia (2001) and Harmer (2001) both speak to our teaching conditions and thus if we were to teach a methods course, we

would be likely to adopt both of them. They are suitable for use in a general methods course as well. However, it should be reminded that this review is by no means intended to be prescriptive. Readers should read through our critique and make a decision as to what best fits their teaching context and course goals.

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