Chapter I

Introduction: The Relationship of Theory to Practice

The purpose of this book is to take a new look at an old question: the relationship between second language teaching practice and what is known about the process of second language acquisition. The usual way to do this is to discuss some research results first, outline a possible theory, and then list some implications. I will, to some extent, follow this plan. A significant portion of this book is, in fact, devoted to summarizing the current state of second language acquisition theory as I see it. Following this, I will draw some general conclusions about application to methods and materials, and eventually describe what characteristics effective materials should have.

Before going through this exercise, however, it is important to state in advance that "theory" and "theoretical research" should not be the only input into deciding on methodology and materials. While my emphasis here is on theory and its implications, it is dangerous to rely only on theory. There are at least three different ways of arriving at answers in methodology and materials, and we must consider all of them. I will devote the remainder of this introduction to a brief description of these three areas, and a discussion of how they interrelate with each other. We will then see what each has to say about method in second and foreign language teaching. My view, for those who like the punch line early, is that all three ways arrive at precisely the same answer. The solution to our problems in language teaching lies not in expensive equipment, exotic methods, sophisticated linguistic analyses, or new laboratories, but in full utilization of what we already have, speakers of the languages using them for real communication. I will also conclude that the best methods might also be the most pleasant, and that, strange as it seems, language acquisition occurs when language is used for what it was designed for, communication.

A. Three Approaches to Method

1. THEORY OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The first area we will discuss will be the central focus of this volume, second language acquisition theory. As developed today, second language acquisition theory can be viewed as a part of "theoretical linguistics", i.e. it can be studied and developed without regard to practical application. As is the case with any scientific theory, it consists of a set of hypotheses, or generalizations, that are consistent with experimental data. These hypotheses can be arrived at using any of a variety of means (a brilliant insight, a dream, etc.). They must, however, be able to predict new data. In other words, hypotheses are not summaries or categories for existing data and observations, but must pass the test of accounting for new data. If our current hypotheses are able to predict new events, they survive. If they fail, even once, they must be altered. If these alterations cause fundamental changes in the original generalizations, the hypotheses may have to be totally abandoned.

Note that according to this way of doing science, we can never really prove anything! We can only look for "supporting evidence". When we do not find supporting evidence, or when we find
counter-evidence, our hypothesis is in trouble. Even when we do find supporting evidence, when the hypothesis makes the correct prediction, a critic can always say that we have not found "enough". Thus, a scientist, professionally speaking, is never able to state that anything has been "proven". All the scientist can do is have a current hypothesis that he or she is interested in testing.

Later in this book I will present a series of hypotheses that make up a coherent theory of second language acquisition. According to the rules of scientific method, it will always be "just theory" and never be "definitely proven". The hypotheses I will present have, however, been found to be consistent with a significant amount of data, experimental and otherwise, and have not yet been confronted with serious counterexamples, in my view. They make up, collectively, my "position". This does not mean that I necessarily "believe" them. What it does mean is that these hypotheses are consistent enough with existing data to be worthy of consideration, and that they appear to capture the data better than other existing generalizations.

Theory is abstract, and does not attempt to be practical. I hope to convince the reader, however, that in the case of second language teaching, there is nothing as practical as a good theory!

2. APPLIED LINGUISTICS RESEARCH

A great deal of research goes on in linguistics that is not aimed at supporting or attacking any coherent theory. This research, rather, is aimed at solving practical, real problems that confront society. A few examples will hopefully make this category clear.

An example that will be important to us in our discussion of language teaching consists of experiments that compare teaching methods. Quite simply, a group of students is taught a foreign language using method A (e.g. audio-lingual), and another group is taught the same language using method B (e.g. grammar-translation). The results of such an experiment would certainly be of interest to theoreticians, since a particular theory might predict that students studying using one method would do better than students using another. The experiment itself, however, is designed for practical ends, i.e. to decide which method we should use in our schools.

The research literature contains many applied linguistics experiments examining other questions of very practical relevance, e.g.:

Will instruction in a second language make children more intelligent? (or less intelligent?)

Should non-English speaking children in American Bilingual Education begin to read in their first language or in English?

3. IDEAS AND INTUITIONS FROM EXPERIENCE

A third approach to method does not rely on experimentation at all. It relies, rather, on the insights and observations of experienced language teachers and students of foreign languages. It consists of "ideas that work" (the name of a column in the TESOL Newsletter edited by Darlene Larson, consisting of pedagogical techniques sent in by teachers), introspections by language
students (e.g. "diary studies"), and other informal observations. While results of research are regularly presented in professional journals, teachers' insights are not easily accessed and shared. Language teaching organizations often arrange meetings so that experienced teachers can share their techniques and insights with others (e.g. the highly successful "mini-conferences" organized by the California TESOL organization). Empirical support for new techniques is neither expected nor presented; rather, the word of the teacher is sufficient evidence, often, for a new idea to be at least tried out in different classes.

B. Interactions Among Approaches to Practice

Before discussing what each approach has to say about methods and materials, I would like to make a modest proposal: the three approaches should influence and help each other. It seems obvious, first of all, that researchers would be interested in the results of applied research, since such experiments can provide potential confirming and counter evidence for theories of second language acquisition. Similarly, it stands to reason that applied linguistics researchers should pay some attention to strictly theoretical research, since a successful theory might give researchers deeper insight into the results of their studies.

It also seems reasonable to suggest that researchers in both theoretical and applied linguistics would benefit by both teaching and studying languages, in order to get more insight into the language acquisition process. Similarly, one might expect practitioners to be interested in the results of research, and one might also expect researchers to be very interested in the opinions of both teachers and language students.

Figure 1.1 illustrates this ideal world, with information flowing between all three areas that influence language teaching methodology. Figure 1.2 is, however, much closer to the actual state of affairs: there is, today, very little interaction between and among the three areas.

Fig 1.1. Ideal relationship between theory, applied linguistics research, ideas and intuitions and language teaching practice.
In reality, many researchers are no longer involved in language teaching and language acquisition, and do not interact with teachers. There is also far too little interaction between theoretical and applied research; those who search for the best method are often too little concerned with the underlying theory. What is perhaps most evident is that teachers and materials developers pay little attention to research and theorizing of any sort.

There is good reason for this lack of interaction, especially the failure of researchers and teachers to interact. The reasons for this lack of communication do not stem from any anti-intellectualism on the part of teachers. They stem, rather, from the failure of research to supply relevant input in the past, combined with the insistence on the part of theoreticians that their insights were the only legitimate determinant of teacher behavior and materials construction. In other words, we have, in the past, gone straight from theory to practice, and it simply has not worked.

Some well-known examples of this approach include the direct application of the principles of behaviorist psychology in the classroom, known as the audio-lingual method. Theoreticians insisted that dialogue and pattern drill were "the way" to teach language, and recommended techniques that felt wrong to many teachers and students. A more recent "application of theory" was what may be called the "applied transformational grammar" movement, which featured materials directly based on current work in theoretical syntax and phonology. Applied TG did not significantly advance language teaching, for reasons that will become clear as we proceed. Its only tangible effect, perhaps, was that it needlessly made many teachers feel unprepared because they had not been trained in the latest version of transformational theory. (Lest the reader get the wrong impression, my personal view is that transformational-generative grammar, and the progress it stimulated in formal linguistics, should be recognized as an extremely important contribution, and easily outdid previous theories of linguistic structure. My point here is that it does not necessarily follow that second language methods and materials should be based directly on TG.)

These two theories, then, failed. The first, behaviorist theory, failed to apply successfully to language teaching because it was, simply, not a theory of language acquisition. The second, TG, failed because it was a theory of the product, the adult's competence, and not a theory of how the adult got that competence. It is not a theory of the process of language acquisition.

The "new" theory, which I will present in Chapter II, is a theory of second language acquisition, and attempts to deal with the process of language acquisition, not its product. Despite these
virtues, it should only be considered one of several possible sources of information in determining methods and materials for second language teaching.

Compounding the failure of theoreticians to supply relevant theory has been the feeling among practitioners that failure to make the theory "work" has been their fault. They incorrectly concluded that it was their ignorance of theory that caused these theory-based methods to fail. As a result of this, teachers in recent years have appealed mostly to area III, their own ideas and intuitions, in determining what they do in the classroom. What teachers actually do is no longer based on theoretical or applied research. Materials, and many books on methodology, are based primarily on what seems to work in the classroom, and only rarely on a theory (recall earlier books based on audiolingualism or TG), and are usually not field-tested.

C. What the Three Approaches Have to Say About Method

The purpose of this book is to summarize one current theory and state the implications of the theory to method. I will briefly summarize here what some of these implications are, anticipating Chapter III. What current theory implies, quite simply, is that language acquisition, first or second, occurs only when comprehension of real messages occurs, and when the acquirer is not "on the defensive", to use Stevick's apt phrase. Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill. It does not occur overnight, however. Real language acquisition develops slowly, and speaking skills emerge significantly later than listening skills, even when conditions are perfect. The best methods are therefore those that supply "comprehensible input" in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are "ready", recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production.

In several places in this book I will attempt to make the point that research in applied linguistics is very consistent with the theoretical research in second language acquisition and its implications. The "best methods" according to comparative research studies (comparing methods A and B, as described earlier) appear to be "input methods", those methods that focus on supplying comprehensible input in pressure-free situations.

We can get an idea of what the "ideas and intuitions" area feels is the "best method" by a survey of pedagogically-oriented papers in current journals and the titles of presentations at teacher workshops. The titles have changed markedly over the years! A decade ago teacher-oriented articles and presentations focused on grammatical description, reflecting the concern with product, and procedures for drilling. *Current titles more clearly reflect promoting real communication in the classroom, helping students understand spoken and written input and participate in conversations.*

In workshops and mini-conferences, we no longer see presentations on fine points of grammar, or on types of substitution drill. "Ideas that work" are ideas about role-playing, using the newspaper as a teaching aid, socio-drama, etc. Moreover, newer methodology has, as a primary goal, the lowering of student anxiety (see Chapter III).
D. Goals of This Book

The primary goal of this book is to present current theory and its implications. There is another goal, however, and that is to reintroduce teachers to theory and hopefully to gain their confidence again. The time has come to look to theory again, realizing that the most current theory may still not be the final word on second language acquisition. I am not asking practitioners or materials developers to follow all of the implications of theory blindly. My hope is only that our results will be considered as another source of ideas and input to methods and materials, in partnership with conclusions reached by practitioners themselves from their own experience as language teachers and language acquirers.

Notes

1 Consider, for example, the table of contents of Language Learning, vol. 9, 1959, which included:
   - "Grammatical theory and practice in an English grammar class"
   - "Reaching the French verb"
   - "Noun-classes and the practical teacher"
   - "Morpheme alternants in Spanish verb forms"
   - "'Thechnemes' and the rhythm of class activity"
Volume 12, 1962, contained:
   - "Annotated bibliography of generative grammar"

2 The 1979 volume of the TESOL Quarterly, for example, contains articles such as:
   - "Using radio commercials as supplementary materials in ESL listening classes"
   - "Communicative writing"
   - "Joke-telling as a tool in ESL"
reflecting the current emphasis on communication in the classroom.

(Notes 1 and 2 certainly do not represent a wide sample of activity in the field, but they are representative. In recent years, the journal Language Learning has focused on theoretical and applied research, rather than pedagogy. For this reason, I used the TESOL Quarterly, which began publication in 1967, for current titles.)