

Challenging Hidden Assumptions in Language Teaching

Vivian Cook

Newcastle University, United Kingdom

vivian.cook@newcastle.ac.uk

Abstract

Much language teaching still depends on assumptions established in the nineteenth century, namely the priority of speech over writing, the maximal use of the target language in the classroom, the rejection of explicit explanation of grammar and the use of the native speaker as the role model for the student. None of these assumptions are supported by contemporary view of second language acquisition: written language has its own characteristics and functions; however much the first language is banned, it is still active in the students' minds; grammar is a central component of language learning, whether explicit or otherwise; students should aim to be successful second language users, not imitation of native speakers. The assumptions need then to be re-examined in the light of current ideas of second language learning.

Keywords: Language Teaching, Hidden Assumptions, Second Language Learning

Introduction

This paper is the latest version of an argument that I have been trying to develop for some time (for example Cook 1999, 2003, 2010), namely that certain ideas put forward in the late nineteenth century still have a covert influence on much of what goes on in language teaching classrooms. The debate about language teaching methods such as the communicative approach, task-based learning and post-method lack of method (Kumaravadivelu, 2006) seldom deals with these all pervasive underlying ideas and so these aspects of language teaching never change. This is not to say that they are necessarily wrong but that it is dangerous to base teaching on a set of assumptions that are never brought out of the closet to be aired and either accepted as fitting with contemporary ideas and research or rejected as unjustified and inappropriate.

The late nineteenth century saw two important public movements about language. One was the start of the International Phonetics Association in 1886 that yielded the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), which gave a new weight and authority to the description of the spoken language. The other was the Reform movement led by phoneticians and philologists in the 1880s and 1890s, most familiar now from the works of Henry Sweet in England and Otto Jespersen in Denmark, whose 1904 book *How to Teach a Foreign Language* is still a highly readable and thoughtful introduction to language teaching. The tenets that emerged, explicitly or implicitly, stressed spoken language as the goal, de-emphasised the use of written texts, discouraged the use of the first language and visualised the classroom as a structured second language environment from which the first language was effectively banned.

In part this was a reaction to the classical teaching method now known as Grammar Translation, which concentrated on the written language rather than the spoken, particularly the discussion and translation of literary texts, conveyed meaning through translation, and whose main teaching techniques were translation of texts and explicit discussion of grammatical rules. At an English school in the 1950s I was taught both Latin and French by these techniques, the histories of Livy for Latin, the plays of Molière for French, for Latin grammar *Bradley's Arnold*

Latin Composition (Arnold, 2006), still going strong after 150 years, for French Whitmarsh's *Advanced French Course* (Whitmarsh & Jukes, 1956). The only real difference between the teaching of the dead language and the living language was a 20-minute oral examination that counted for a tiny portion of the result. In other words, despite the Reform revolution, the Grammar/ Translation method was still alive in schools for many years and is still much practiced at university level in the UK and in schools in China and Gaza, to take two random examples.

Nevertheless, outside these areas, the new ideas about language and teaching imposed an agenda on language teaching that is still in force to this day virtually regardless of teaching method. As we will see, from the Direct Method to the Audiolingual and Audiovisual Methods to the Communicative Approach to Task-based Learning, the fashionable mainstream methods of language teaching have implicitly adopted Victorian principles by emphasising speech and shunning the first language. Only the Reading Method of the 1930s perhaps tried to swim against the tide. The differences between twentieth century teaching methods have been sold to teachers rather than their underlying similarities. Let us then look at some of these persistent assumptions and see how relevant they may be to twenty-first century language teaching.

Assumption 1. The Basis for Language Teaching is Speech, Not Writing

Since the very first discussion of language, generations of linguists have assumed that speech is more important than writing. Aristotle (350 BC) proclaimed 'Sounds produced by the voice are symbols of affections of the soul, and writing is a symbol of vocal sounds'; Bloomfield (1933) that 'Writing is not language, but merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks'; Lyons (1968) that '... the spoken language is primary and ... writing is essentially a means of representing speech in another medium'. Most linguists today would still insist on speech being the foundation of language, even if their chief source of evidence is specimen sentences of written language. Other arguments for speech as the basis of language are: children learn speech naturally from their caretakers but usually have to be taught written language by teachers; many children fail to learn to write, very few fail to learn to speak; many languages exist in spoken form but not in written, such as Swiss German; and, historically, speech everywhere came into being before writing. An additional argument from teachers is that, in a language with a complex spelling system like English, students are liable to make mistakes in speech because of the spelling, say pronouncing 'great' the same as 'greet' rather than as 'grate' and saying aloud the 'silent' 'h' in 'honest'.

Hence the assumption that language teaching should start from speaking was understandable in that it had the support of both common sense and expert opinion. The idea that the so-called four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – should be learnt in that order is still a common expression of this. In my first teaching job I had to use an audio-visual method employing film strips of conversations and tape recordings without any written language at all. This is an extreme version of the situation still reflected in most teaching: the written language acts chiefly as a trigger for spoken communication and oral tasks, hardly ever as a system in its own right. So far as present-day task-based learning is concerned, Ellis (2003, p. 6) points out 'The literature on tasks, both research-based or pedagogic, assumes that tasks are directed at oral skills, particularly speaking'.

So is it still valid to emphasise speaking in the early stage of second language learning, to the virtual exclusion of any use of writing other than as a spur for speech? Most of the arguments for speech that have just been made have been challenged. The overall idea is that second

language use is something of its own, not a diminished form of monolingual use, and that bilinguals are people in their own right, not two monolinguals in one person –the multi-competence perspective. Much of the above evidence is then simply irrelevant to L2 users: literate L2 users do not acquire their second language in the same way that non-literate children acquire their first language as literacy has had a transforming effect on their minds; the history of languages and civilisation is irrelevant to how people learn second languages as they are mostly unaware of it.

The crucial argument is, however, that many now consider that writing is an alternative representation of language to speech rather than simply spoken language written down. Written English has its own grammar – comparatively denser in content words and lighter in function words than speech – and its own vocabulary – ‘Alight here’ and ‘Haberdashery’ are often seen on signs but never heard in speech. English has two forms of representation, one spoken, one written, both with their typical features; to some, they are equivalent to two languages that have to be translated from one to the other (Haas, 1970). Written English can distinguish between homophones in a way that spoken English cannot – ‘hole/whole’, ‘piece/peace’; written French can distinguish the different meanings of the spoken form /parle/ by spelling them ‘parlé, parlée, parlés, parlées, parler, parlez’. Crucially the written language has become far more important in most younger people’s lives through emails, texting and social media; the ability to communicate with other people through writing is vital to contemporary life, not an appendix to spoken conversation. The amount of teaching devoted to pronunciation is probably a hundred times that devoted to spelling, yet, for many students, keyboarding is a far more likely means of communication in the second language outside the class than spoken conversation.

So it is certainly worth questioning the reliance on speech as the basic form of language in language teaching, which is now simply an assumption rather than an evidence-based fact. There may indeed be cogent reasons why teaching should insist on the primacy of spoken language. But these need to be advanced and aired if we are not simply to base language teaching on Victorian principles.

Assumption 2. The Target Language Should Be Used in the Classroom Rather than the First Language

A vital belief for most twentieth century language teaching was that only one language should be spoken in the classroom – the target language – an approach that became known as the Direct Method. The classroom should become a monolingual second language situation for the students so that, from the moment they entered, they and the teacher spoke only the second language; the first language was effectively hung on a peg by their door along with their coats. The audiolingual method, for instance, was typical in recommending ‘rendering English inactive while the new language is being learnt’ (Brooks, 1964, p. 142). Students’ textbooks were only in the second language; monolingual dictionaries like the *Advanced Learner’s* (1948) were encouraged rather than bilingual dictionaries; exercises that relied on the first language like translation were banned; examination papers had to be set only in the second language; the group-work involved in task-based learning needed to be carefully monitored by the teacher so that students did not slip back into their first language – ‘Don’t ban mother-tongue use but encourage attempts to use the target language’ (Willis, 1996, p. 130). Typically officialdom everywhere in the world insisted that the first language was not welcome in the classroom. The

UK National Curriculum for instance proclaimed: ‘The natural use of the target language for virtually all communication is a sure sign of a good modern language course’ (DES, 1990, p. 58).

The arguments for this virtual ban on the first language are seldom put forward: it is taken for granted that this is right, more a matter of common sense than rational debate. One reason that is sometimes heard is that children acquiring their first language do not have a second available to them, so second language acquisition should also proceed without the crutch of a first language to lean on. Another reason was the belief that the best form of bilingualism was when the languages lived in two distinct compartments in the mind; students should be trained to use the second language entirely independently of the first; effectively they were seen as *tabula rasas* learning language from scratch. Hence the communicative approach could insist on the necessity of teaching language functions to the students; logically, since most language functions are universal to human life, language teaching was actually concerned with teaching the L2 grammar and vocabulary that expressed these functions. An additional argument put forward by the communicative approach was that students needed to experience the second language as a functional system that was used for a purpose. By carrying out language events such as greeting or giving instructions in the second language, the teacher could demonstrate the everyday use of the language quite apart from the content of the teaching.

Again these arguments rely more on common-sense than scientific views of language and language learning. Monolingual children do not have another language – how could they, by definition? Second language students *do* have a first language; cutting them off from all of their previous language knowledge and experience is to impose upon them the limitations of a monolingual childhood for no other reason than a purely logical comparison between first and second language acquisition. The use of the second language for real classroom functions is indeed desirable but only a few functions naturally occur in the classroom, some of them peculiar to it such as discipline; the remainder still needs exemplifying from language teaching texts and exercises.

More crucial is the compartmentalisation of the two languages. Weinreich (1953) suggested a division between compound bilinguals who link the two languages and coordinate bilinguals who keep them apart. The L1 ban assumes that coordinate bilingualism is the only valid form. However modern bilingualism research insists on exactly the opposite: the two languages in the mind are connected in every possible way; not only does the first language influence the second but the second influences the first; the two lexicons are interwoven in complex ways, enabling for example the complex process of codeswitching that most bilinguals employ when talking with other people who know the same two languages; much research has shown that whichever language the speaker is using the other language is not turned off but still present in a subdued form. Very few people would now accept that pure coordinate bilingualism is a possible, or indeed desirable, outcome of second language learning.

There is one undoubtedly valid reason for having the students exposed to a substantial amount of the second language: in many countries the classroom teacher may provide the students’ only exposure to the second language, except possibly in the case of English which is hard to avoid in many countries. But this is a practical matter of providing language input for the students’ learning apparatus to digest, not with separation of the two languages. It is clear that, if teaching wants to cling to its virtual elimination of the first language from the classroom, it will have to justify this in the teeth of modern views about bilingualism and second language

acquisition. Banning the first language from the classroom turns it into a pretend monolingual situation, not acknowledging the bilingual situation it actually is.

Assumption 3. Teachers Should Avoid Explicit Discussion of Grammar

Part of the ideology of the 19th century Reform was the rejection of grammar; the IPA for example suggested grammar should be introduced after an initial speech-only stage (though this involved phonetic transcription). A pivotal element in the Grammar/Translation Method was getting the students to learn through conscious understanding of grammatical rules presented by the teacher or the grammar book. Indeed this was often held to have other payoffs in the form of training the students in logical thinking, inherited from the belief that English or other vernaculars were fundamentally illogical compared to Latin or French. The current Mayor of London has proclaimed that ‘Latin and Greek are great intellectual disciplines, forcing young minds to think in a logical and analytical way’. The Audiolingual Method had a slogan ‘Teach the language, not about the language’ (Moulton, 1961). Grammar continued to play an important role in organising teaching; the Audiolingual Method organised its structure drills around ‘structures’ without explaining to the students what they were actually about; the communicative syllabus that led to the Common European Framework carefully spelled out the grammatical ‘exponents’ of the notions and functions that students were expected to learn, again without anything much being said to the students. Organising language teaching around grammar is one thing, using it explicitly in the classroom is quite another.

The ostensible reasons for avoiding grammar were mostly that second language learning should not be a conscious matter. It was doing language that mattered, whether drilling, repeating, or having role plays and information gap exercises; conscious explanation and study of grammatical rules were essentially irrelevant if students wanted to use the language actively in the world outside the classroom. There continues to be constant debate in second language acquisition research about whether grammatical explanation is an effective way of learning a second language. As with other assumptions, the fact that young children learn their first language with no grammatical explanation is beside the point; the second language learner is at a quite different mental stage from the child and may be able to understand explanations that children could not cope with; in many other areas of human life like learning to drive a car, you start with hearing explanations of how to use the brake and clutch; as you progress, you dispense with these explicit rules and are no longer consciously aware of them. The question is whether second language learning fits this picture in which conscious understanding converts into unconscious use or whether explicit grammar rules do not convert into unconscious use, as Krashen has always claimed (Krashen, 1985).

This is the assumption that has been challenged by language teaching methodologists developing task-based learning. Teaching grammar rules in isolation in the classroom was derided as Focus on Forms (FonFs), while teaching grammar as a meaningful system arising out of the tasks students were carrying out was praised as Focus on Form (FonF), using a distinction made by Long (1991). So grammar comes in by the back door so to speak.

Yet the disappointment is that the content of language teaching grammar still remains the same traditional-style EFL grammar used from Palmer in the 1920s, particularly in its emphasis on verb forms. Halliday used to observe that the question was, not whether grammar should be used in language teaching, but *which* grammar should be used. The big descriptive grammars of the past thirty years such as Biber et al (1999) are not drawn on, the grammatical insights of, say,

cognitive linguistics, generative grammar and systemic-functional approaches are not utilised. For example the latter would undoubtedly deny that any grammar teaching could happen without meaning; to Halliday, ‘the grammar is seen as a network of interrelated meaningful choices’(Halliday & Mattheissen, 2013). Whether we choose to explain it or not in the classroom, grammar is a central component of language that the student cannot dispense with.

Assumption 4. The target of language teaching is the native speaker

The final assumption cannot be attributed to any single nineteenth century dictum but undoubtedly underpinned language teaching throughout the twentieth century, namely that the model for second language learning is the native speaker. This was expressed as ‘The native speaker’s “competence” or “proficiency” or “knowledge of the language” is a necessary point of reference for the second language proficiency concept used in language teaching’ (Stern, 1983, p. 341) or as ‘A language is what its native speakers say,...’ (Moulton, 1966) or as ‘the ultimate goal – perhaps unattainable for some – is, nonetheless, to “sound like a native speaker” in all aspects of the language’ (González-Nueno, 1997, p. 261). The goal of language teaching was defined as the knowledge and performance of the native speaker. Advanced L2 users still apologise for their foreign accents; teachers and examiners still evaluate students by their successful approximation to native speakers; students too see themselves as failures for not matching this magic native speaker target. The ultimate goal of second language teaching is then for the L2 user to pass for a native speaker.

But how is this relevant to second language learners? They are not, and can never be, native speakers, if one accepts the usual definition of native speaker as someone speaking the language they learnt first as a child. Their accent in English will indeed show that they come from France or Japan, just as a native speaker’s accent shows they come from Newcastle upon Tyne, New York or New South Wales. People’s identities are bound up with their accents: there is no virtue in a French person *not* sounding French when they speak English unless they want to renounce their French identity – provided of course their accent is comprehensible to other people, which is the real communicative issue. A French wine-grower interviewed on the BBC said ‘I speak English very badly but my French accent is perfect’; he was a French person expressing his own identity through another language, not a French person pretending to be English. Good students are not failed native speakers: they are successful L2 users. They can do something a monolingual cannot – function in two languages. Confining them by the limitations of speakers who can only function in one language excludes all the extras that L2 users have in their language, say the abilities to codeswitch, to translate or to be aware of the language system; the native speaker target will indeed show what L2 users cannot do in terms of native speakers; it cannot show their unique skills and attributes which go outside the native speaker box.

For the past fifteen years this native speaker assumption has been increasingly under attack. Partly this reflects the rise of English as Lingua Franca (ELF) (Seidlhofer, 2004), a variety of English used by non-native speakers to talk to each other rather than to native speakers, which has its own grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation – a language with no native speakers. If teaching is to reflect students’ real needs to communicate with non-native speakers, say business executives in Thailand negotiating with their equivalents in Japan through English, then teaching has to make this one of its possible goals. Partly this shift reflects worries about the power and control exerted over ‘their’ language by native speakers from the country where it originated historically. Countries such as France, Spain and England have laid claim to own

‘their’ language: English must belong to the English. Therefore obviously students should learn the English of British native speakers; teachers should be native speakers of British English; coursebooks should be published in England; examinations should be set from England; students should go to England to learn English; and so on.

But the English language is not the same as the pound sterling or the US dollar. People everywhere have the right to speak any language appropriate to their needs; increasingly the nationalist home country view of languages has been seen as a form of colonialism whereby certain countries control others by indirect means for political, cultural and economic ends. It may well be that some students want to be like native speakers but for many the native speaker goal is too much of a burden. They will make far better progress if they can aim at a target they can realistically achieve – successful L2 use – rather than failing continually to meet a monolingual native speaker target they can never achieve – by definition.

This paper has suggested that language teaching should put its house in order by examining assumptions implicit in its practices that are seldom brought into the light of day. It may well be that there are perfectly good reasons why these practices should continue despite the criticisms made above. But this decision needs to be based on current ideas of how second language learning takes place and on the contemporary goals of language teaching, not on common sense, tradition or outdated views of language.

About the Author

Vivian Cook is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Newcastle. He is chiefly known through books on second language learning, Chomsky and spelling. He has been researching in the fields of second language acquisition and writing systems for over 45 years and was founding President of the European Second Language Association (EUROSLA). His current interests include the English writing system and the multi-competence view of L2 acquisition, in particular bilingual cognition.

References

- Arnold, T. K. (2006). *Bradley's Arnold Latin composition*. Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers. (originally published in 1859)
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow: Longman.
- Bloomfield, L. (1933). *Language*. New York: Holt.
- Brooks, N. (1964). *Language and language learning*. New York: Harcourt Brace
- Cook, V. (1999), Going beyond the native speaker in language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(2), 185-209.
- Cook, V. J. (ed.) (2003). *Effects of the second language on the first*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Cook, V. J. (2010), Questioning traditional assumptions of language teaching. *Nouveaux Cahiers de Linguistique Française*, 29, 7-22.
- Department of Education and Science (1990). *English in the national curriculum (No.2)*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- González-Nueno, M. (1997). Voice-Onset-Time in the perception of foreign accent. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35(4), 251-267.
- Haas, W. (1970). *Phonographic translation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Halliday, M.A.K., & Mattheisen, M.I.M. (2013). *Halliday's introduction to Functional Grammar*. Fourth edition. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Harris, R. (2000). *Rethinking writing*. Indiana University Press.
- Hornby, A.S. (1948). *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jespersen, O. (1904). *How to learn a language*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Krashen, S. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and implications*. New York: Longman.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006). *Understanding language teaching: From method to postmethod*. Mahwah, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Long, M. (1991). Focus on form: A design feature in language teaching methodology. In K. de Bot, R. Ginsberg, & C. Kramsch (Eds.), *Foreign language research in cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 39–52). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Lyons, J. (1968). *Introduction to theoretical linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moulton, W. G. (1966). *A linguistic guide to language learning*. New York: Modern Language Association.
- Seidlhofer, B. (2004). Research perspectives on teaching English as a lingua franca. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 24, 209-239.
- Stern, H. H. (1983). *Fundamental concepts of language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weinreich, U. (1953). *Languages in contact*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Whitmarsh, W. F., & Jukes N. (1956). *Advanced French course*. London: Longman.
- Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Harlow: Longman.