



**15th**  
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CONGRESS

# SEVEN CONTROVERSIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

## PENNY UR



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# Seven 'hot topics' in English language teaching

For each:

1. Clarifying the issue
2. The evidence and arguments for / against
3. My own position

# **1. Task-based instruction versus 'traditional' methods**

# Task-based instruction

- Language is best learned as an outcome of the performance of communicative tasks.
- Reaction against 'traditional' grammar-oriented methods.
- Accords with with learner-centred and post-modernist approaches.

# Research

The Interaction Hypothesis (Long & Porter, 1985;  
Long & Crookes, 1992)

Extensive research-based literature (Ellis et al.,  
2019, *inter alia*)

# Traditional methods

A new language (in instructional settings) is best learned through direct instruction in language forms and meanings (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar).

PPP: presentation, practice, production.

# Research

Explicit grammar and vocabulary  
teaching

Norris & Ortega, 2001

Laufer, 2005

# Some concessions accepted by both

- Task-based instruction allows for the inclusion of ‘focus on form’.
- Traditional methods allow for the inclusion of communicative tasks in the four skills.

A question of **focus, syllabus, and priorities.**

# No conclusive evidence that TBI is consistently better

- Anecdotal evidence of success / failure
  - Not widely accepted worldwide
  - Rare as the basis for textbooks
  - Less effective in Asian contexts

So can we decide which is better?

# In fact ...

No research so far has conclusively 'proved' the superiority of one method over another.

# Choosing an appropriate language-teaching methodology: a combination

personal ideology and beliefs

+

professional experience

+

the local context: English-speaking /non-English speaking environment

+

the local context: age and level of students

+

the local context: culture of learning and preferences of the local population

# **My own position (non-English-speaking environment)**

Elementary and intermediate learners:

**Predominantly traditional.**

Advanced, academic classes:

**Predominantly task-based.**

In both cases: occasional procedures borrowed from the other.

## **2. Online teaching versus face-to-face**

# Online teaching

- Increasingly popular
- Available to a larger population of learners
- Appeal to 'digital natives'?
- Effective?

# Appeal

If you want to learn Chinese:

You can take

1. A face-to-face course at a local language school
2. An online course

Assuming similar cost and time-frame:

Which would you choose?

# Research on effectiveness

Mixed

Mainly based on university-level courses

This meta-analysis research estimated and compared the differences between the academic performance of students enrolled in distance education courses, relative to those enrolled in traditional settings, as demonstrated by their final course grades/scores, within the last twenty year (1990-2009) period, further broken down to four distinct sub-periods. ...Experimental and quasi-experimental studies ... provided effect sizes, clearly demonstrating that in 70% of the cases, students taking courses by distance education outperformed their student counterparts in the traditionally instructed courses;

Shachar & Neumann, 2010.

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In this study we examined differences between online distance education and traditional classroom learning for an introductory undergraduate statistics course. Two outcome dimensions were measured: students' final grades and student satisfaction with the course. Using independent samples t-tests, results indicated that there was no significant difference in grades between the online and traditional classroom contexts. However, students enrolled in the online course were significantly less satisfied with the course than the traditional classroom students on several dimensions.

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Using a dataset containing nearly 500,000 courses taken by over 40,000 community and technical college students in Washington State, this study examines how well students adapt to the online environment in terms of their ability to persist and earn strong grades in online courses relative to their ability to do so in face-to-face courses. While all types of students in the study suffered decrements in performance in online courses, some struggled more than others to adapt: males, younger students, Black students, and students with lower grade point averages. In particular, students struggled in subject areas such as English and social science.

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Xu & Jaggars, 2013,

# Some issues

- Dropout
  - Ensuring participation
- Eliciting individual responses
- Giving individual feedback
  - Building relationships

# My position

- Online learning is important; even essential where the student population is very large and/or distant.
- It supplements, does not replace, face-to-face.
- The ideal: blended (but not always possible).
- Issues such as participation, dropout, attention to individuals need to be addressed in course design.

# **3. Use of L1 versus non-use of L1**

# What do you feel?

1. Ideally, English lessons should be entirely in English.
2. If I use Spanish in English lessons I feel a bit guilty.
3. My director of studies urges me to stick to English.
4. Translation should not be used in English language teaching.

# On the whole

Teachers worldwide ...

- feel that the students' L1 should be avoided in English classrooms;
- do in fact use it ...
- ... and feel guilty about it.

# Research 1: Academic learning / engaged time

The more time spent actually learning the target language, the more will be learnt (Gettinger & Walter, 2012).

Is this the same as time exposed to English?

Is all time using L1 actually wasting time?

# **Situations where students are exposed to English but not learning**

When they simply do not understand it

When they are doing 'busy' work without learning

- Word games like 'Hangman'
- Coloring, formatting
- Setting up games, online tools etc.

# Situations where use of L1 may increase ALT

- Quick translation of a new vocabulary item
- Clarification of an error based on L1 interference
- Grammar explanations
- Complex instructions

# Research 2: Evidence in favour of use of L1

Hall & Cook, 2012

Laufer & Girsai, 2008

# My position

80-90% of the lesson should be in English.

The more advanced the class – the more English can be used.

**It's OK to use the L1** where

- Students would not understand the English
- Where use of L1 saves time, which is then devoted to engaging with English.

## **4. Experience versus research as the major source of teacher knowledge**

# Conflicting Approaches

‘Academic research has relatively modest value for teaching and learning’ (Maley, 2016)

VERSUS

‘Academic knowledge is an important basic source of professional knowledge’ (Boshuizen et al., 2005:5)

# The literature on expertise

Research on expertise indicates that experience (+reflection) is the key factor.

‘Novice versus expert’

Applies to other professions as well as teaching (medicine, law, nursing, management...)

Schoen, 1983; Ericsson et al., 2006.

# So what, then, is the place of research?

- Research can provide us with insights and information that we could not get from our own experience, colleagues or students.
- It enables us to understand ideas – both practical and theoretical – that we would not otherwise have encountered.
- It enables us to progress beyond a ‘ceiling’ based on personal experience and discussion.

# The research can help us

1. Confirm previous assumptions
2. Add more depth and detail to previous knowledge
3. Provide new information or ideas
4. Destabilize, or make us rethink previous assumptions

# 1. Confirm previous assumptions

The importance of explicit grammar teaching

(Norris & Ortega, 2001)

A meta-analysis

(See also Gorman & Ellis, 2019)

## **2. Add more depth and detail to previous knowledge. Example: Error correction**

Relative effectiveness of different kinds of oral corrective feedback.

Lyster & Ranta, 1997

<b>Types of correction:</b>	<b>Frequency of use:</b>	<b>Uptake:</b>
Recast	55%	18%
Elicitation	14%	46%
Clarification request	11%	28%
Metalinguistic feedback	8%	45%
Explicit correction	7%	36%
Repetition	5%	31%

# RESULTS

Simple 'recast' was most often used, but least 'uptake'

(See also: Lyster, Saito & Sato, 2013; Brown, 2016)

# How much should we correct?

On the whole, students want more, teachers less.

(Amrhein & Nassaji, 2010; Ur, 2012; Lee, 2019)

Conclusion?

Lee (2019): Less is more

Ur (2012): More is more (but practical limitations)

# 3. Provide new information or ideas

## Corpus-based frequency lists

Words:

<https://www.wordandphrase.info/frequencyList.asp>

Chunks: (multi-word units):

(Martinez & Schmitt, 2012; Liu, 2003, 2012)

Both words and chunks:

English vocabulary profile (according to CEFR levels)

<http://vocabulary.englishprofile.org/staticfiles/about.html>

# **4. Destabilize, or make us rethink previous assumptions**

Guessing new words from context.

(Laufer and Bensoussan, 1984; Nassaji, 2003)

# BenSoussan & Laufer

Of 70 unknown words the researchers determined that there were:

- No contextual clues for 29
- Partial clues for 28
- Clear clues for 13

Students were able to guess correctly 17 out of the 70.

# Nassaji

- Text at least 95% of which was understood.
- Used 'think-aloud' procedures.
- In more than half the cases, the learners guessed wrong.

# General conclusion

*If your aim is vocabulary learning, asking students to guess meaning from context is mostly not worth doing.*

Students will usually guess wrong.

Better just to tell them the answer, and use the time saved for active review.

# My position

Academic research is a minor, **but significant**, contributor to teacher expertise.

Teachers should try to to be aware of research evidence that can supplement his or her own experience.

# **5. Correct errors versus don't correct errors during speaking**

# The correction-during-communication paradox

If we don't correct – the error may be reinforced ('fossilized').

If we correct during communicative work using unobtrusive recasts – the correction may be ineffective.

If we correct more effectively using explicit feedback and 'processing' – we may damage the communicative value of the activity.

# Can the research help?

Probably in most cases: immediate corrective feedback is more effective...

(Li, n.d.)

... and is preferred by the learners themselves

(Harmer, 2005)

... quick recasts are probably not effective (Lyster & Ranta, 1997)

# **My position a localized decision: balancing profit and loss**

In any particular case: which is more important?

1. Preserving the fluent process and communicative nature of the interaction?

or

2. Providing corrective feedback where it is needed to help learners improve their accuracy and prevent 'fossilization'?

# No easy answer to this one!

But it is clear that:

there is no absolute 'rule' about when not to correct

our decision will involve a lot of different considerations specific to the learner, such as...

- The aims of the course
- The culture of learning
- The personality of the student
- The motivation of the student(s)
- The sheer number of mistakes
- The importance of the mistake
- The ‘excitement level’ of the activity
- **Students’ own preferences**

## **6. The native speaker versus the non-native speaker as the ideal model for students**

# Many students will tell you

‘I want to speak English like a native speaker’

# Many heads of language schools prefer NS teachers

International employment as a teacher:

“Only native speakers need apply and they must hold a passport from a native speaking country.”

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/esljobs/permalink/10155524110381491/>

“We are a language school in need of full-time English teachers, part-time English teachers, and part-time French teachers. ... Only native speakers need apply.”

<https://www.totalesl.com/total-esl-jobs/apply.php?job=110418>

# And who do students prefer?

“The findings show that, when it comes to English language learning, most students preferred to have the native teachers of English”

<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/48531645.pdf>

# Against the NS model 1: learning English contrasted with learning any other language

Most languages are learned in order to communicate with members of the (country-specific) target language NS community.

English is learned primarily in order to communicate with, or within the international **NON-NS** community.

So it doesn't make sense to try to be like an English NS.

# **Against the NS model 2: Trying to be a NS of English is 'mission impossible'**

You can never be a native speaker of a language not your own.

Why set up an impossible target for students?

Why not aim for high-level proficiency (by international standards) instead?

# Against the NS model 3: The NS may not be a good model

- NSs typically speak their own local variety of English ...
- ... no 'international' English
- The NS needs to learn international norms in order to be an effective teacher of English as an international language.
- If he/she has not learnt these norms, he/she will not be a good model.

# **Against the NS model 4: The local teacher is likely to be a good model – and an effective instructor**

‘I speak English proficiently, and also my (your) mother tongue’

‘If I can do it, so can you!’

‘I understand your problems – have needed to cope with them myself.’

# My position

Promote the view of English as an international language.

The standard and role model is the competent, high-level speaker of English as an international language.

Which language such a model speaks, or spoke, as their mother tongue, is irrelevant.

**7. 'Textbooks are useful' versus  
'The use of a textbook de-skills the  
teacher'**

# Research 1

Different teachers spend variable amounts of time on textbook-based activity (McGrath, 2013)

Largely depends on local context:

- culture of learning
- requirements of an authority (e.g. Ministry of Education)
- expectations of students and parents

## **(Lack of) Research 2**

No evidence (that I have found) that teachers who adhere closely to the textbook are less skilled ...

... or that teachers who do not use coursebooks are better.

# Is 'slavish' adherence to the textbook possible?

Probably not.

Considerable evidence of teacher adaptation  
(McGrath, 2013)

# My experience

In routine school teaching, I could not have managed without a textbook.

- No time to search for appropriate texts
- Or to compose tasks and exercises

Possibly in a more privileged setting...

# Textbook quality

Many coursebooks are excellent

A question of selection.

But of course...

... No coursebook is perfect.

# My position

The use of a recipe-book does not de-skill a chef.  
Similarly, the use of a coursebook does not 'de-skill' a teacher.  
For novice teachers, it may even 'en-skill'!

# A good teacher

Uses a textbook :

- as a syllabus
- to give structure and a sense of progression
- as a useful 'bank' of texts and tasks

and is able to adapt, discard and add.



# Main reasons for adaptation:

- To add learning value
- To add interest
- To make available to a wider range of levels within the class
- To make more appropriate to a particular target student population

# An example

Doing exercises in different ways.

# Open-ending

Most textbook exercises are closed-ended: items have one pre-determined right answer.

Why?

Conventional 'default' way of doing things: gap-fill, matching, multiple choice.

Easy to check.

Lower-order thinking skills.

May or may not be easier.

# **Making closed-ended exercises into open-ended ones**

Can be done mainly with 'gapfills'

But also with matching exercises and multiple-choice

The result: more learning, more interesting, more individualized.

## ***Write the correct past form***

1. She \_\_\_\_\_ early. (leave)
2. He \_\_\_\_\_ the cake. (make)
3. I \_\_\_\_\_ there for six hours. (sit)
4. The man \_\_\_\_\_ the book. (read)

# Delete the sentence ending

*Complete the sentence*

1. She left \_\_\_\_\_

2. He made \_\_\_\_\_

3. I sat \_\_\_\_\_

4. The man read \_\_\_\_\_

# Delete the pre-set verb

*Put in a correct past form.*

She \_\_\_\_\_ early.

He \_\_\_\_\_ the cake.

I \_\_\_\_\_ there for six hours.

The man \_\_\_\_\_ the book.



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**THANK YOU!**

**[pennyur@gmail.com](mailto:pennyur@gmail.com)**

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