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PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Practitioners respond to Michael Swan's 'Applied Linguistics: A consumer's view'

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Nathan Thomas is an active practitioner and teacher-researcher working predominately in East and Southeast Asia for the past ten years. He has taught at all levels, beginning with young learners before shifting his focus to the upper secondary and tertiary levels. Currently, Nathan is Director of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and an English for academic purposes instructor for a private educational consulting company in Beijing, China. He balances this role as a practitioner with his work as a postgraduate researcher in the Department of Education at the University of Oxford. His interests are wide-ranging but current projects pertain to language learning strategies and self-/other-regulation. He is particularly interested in the role of teacher and learner agency and how this may affect practice.

After moving beyond the initial backstory, Swan's article (2018) can be summarized in one main point: that new ideas in the field, especially methods and approaches to instruction, should be viewed with scepticism. An underlying theme is that practitioners' voices are often unsolicited and/or lack authority in academic discourse. Both aforementioned points contribute to Swan's perceived disconnect between researchers and teachers, and in turn, theory and practice. He argues that the complexity of language learning requires different approaches, acknowledging that what works in one context may not work in another. It appears that Swan's main concern is with 'strong and over-generalized forms' of various hypotheses in second language acquisition that do not account for varying circumstances but rather claim that there is one correct way in which languages can be taught and learnt (p. 254). One particular thorn in his side is the over-arching communicative approach, and task-based language teaching (TBLT) which grew out of it.

First, Swan states that the focus of TBLT is to build fluency and acquire language mostly incidentally; however, the majority of learners lack adequate exposure to the target language to fulfil these aims. To succeed in such '[i]nput-poor instructional situations', Swan argues that grammar and vocabulary should be carefully chosen and taught to ensure necessary language is learnt (p. 251). From my experience, Swan's claims about TBLT being contextually dependent are convincing when I consider the context of many students in homogenous EFL settings, such as Thailand, for example. In my first position, I taught classes of 50+ students, once a week in the 'standard program' and five times a week in the 'mini-English program'. For the students receiving English instruction once a week, most of them found any communicative task a serious challenge due to their lack of the basic 'grammatical and lexical elements that are most needed' (p. 251). We were able to make a little progress in the second term by focusing on what Swan describes as careful selection, prioritizing, and focused practice. We targeted high-frequency words; common, practical phrases; and simple grammatical structures. Remembering the struggle to get students to communicate in English, Swan's argument that students do not have enough out-of-class exposure and only a little class time was definitely supported by my experience with both attempting a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach in term 1 (unsuccessful) and a more traditional/structured approach in term 2 (relatively successful).

Alternatively, in the mini-English programme, having additional class time allowed me to incorporate more input-based activities followed by what Swan labels 'fluency practice' and 'task-supported teaching' (p. 251). Since we had more class time but the students were not exposed to much English outside of class, I felt they still needed a structured approach based on high-frequency lexis and grammar. Their increased consolidation/fluency practice had to be carefully monitored. English was still very foreign to these students and not something they would use on their own. When we recognize that only five out of thirty

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periods a week were in English, 17%, 'bringing instructed language learning closer to naturalistic acquisition' still felt a long way away (p. 249). There was nothing natural about learning English for the students in this context; they communicated with each other in Thai in every other period at school and in every other scenario outside of class. English was inevitably decontextualized, because it did not fit 'naturally' in their context. I agree with Swan when he avers that 'perhaps we need to remind ourselves that the main business of language teaching is, actually, teaching language' (p. 258).

Later, I taught in a bilingual programme where students studied in English for half of the day. In this context, a more communicative approach was possible. In redesigning the syllabus, I scheduled much more time for tasks and incidental acquisition. The tasks were graded for the learners, carefully selected, and closely monitored. The increase in class time and focus on exposure to the target language for lower levels helped to enhance vocabulary knowledge and general proficiency, while higher levels worked more freely. This provides support for Swan's claim that in some contexts TBLT is successful; but, in my case, this was mostly for higher proficiency students and only when given significant class time. One, or even five hours a week was not enough to see any real benefit from TBLT or even a softer CLT approach. From my experience, alternative evidence is hard to conjure up.

As for 'the invisible practitioner' Swan describes in academic research and writing, Swan says that he is 'disturbed when researchers fail to acknowledge the work carried out on my side of the theory-practice divide', firmly associating himself with those he refers to as 'humble practitioner colleagues' (p. 252). Swan's claim about research being dominated by researchers is valid and supported from what I have seen, but to me, it is not much of an argument. Researchers research and teachers teach, predominately. A part of me wonders if the lack of citations is due to poorly planned/conducted/reported studies or if the number of practitioner studies is simply not as great as those carried out by trained, experienced researchers. Most teachers that I have worked with prefer to GET ON WITH IT and are not interested in research or curriculum development or anything beyond their immediate classrooms. While I do agree that teachers should be consulted more, only some are interested in writing and research. Swan's overall argument here is not supported by most of the teachers I have worked with. Many practitioners want their voices to be heard and would like to be/should be consulted, as Swan suggests; however, when it comes down to it, many do not have the time (an important issue), training, or interest to act, especially at the K-12 level.

Finally, Swan states that applied linguistics can help define the most appropriate methods and approaches; yet, they 'must also fit the relevant context, offering solutions that match the problems inherent in the situation' (p. 250). Based on my own experience, I could not agree more. In the future, we may all decide on the best method for learning a language, but if the target context is not ready to accept it, it will inevitably fail. The local, situated knowledge of teachers can help to bridge this gap. However, their job is to teach, so we cannot rely on them to do the work of linguists and researchers as well (unless adequate time and training are provided, which is highly unlikely). I place the bulk of the responsibility on researchers to work with teachers and use practitioner knowledge as a resource if their theories/findings are to be extrapolated to the classroom.

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Peter Brereton is a Celta- and Delta-qualified teacher and holds an M.A. in Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages from the University of Nottingham. He has been teaching English since 2007 and has worked in a wide range of contexts in the UK, Ireland, France, Germany, Latvia, Australia, and Spain. As well as being a Delta local tutor and external assessor, he is currently academic manager of a discussion course at a private university in Tokyo, where his main interests are teacher training and development, particularly through reflective practice and classroom observation. In teaching, Peter is most passionate about the power of feedback, and the use of Demand High techniques to get more from learners.

Over my 11 years as a teacher, my approach as to how best to teach the English language has shifted from emphasising reproduction of discrete grammatical items through a predominately

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presentation-practice-production (PPP) approach (acquired in pre-service training) towards a TBLT approach with a stronger focus on emergent language and the development of communicative skills and strategic competencies. I feel that TBLT's emphasis on learners using the resources at their disposal and pushing the boundaries of their knowledge to negotiate meaning and reach agreement can be particularly effective at engaging and challenging learners, although I do understand some of the criticism levied at the approach.

Indeed, while TBLT does much to develop learners' already acquired skills, it is often criticised for being less effective at actually helping them LEARN new ones and, as such, TBLT does seem more appropriate for those learners with an already solid foundation of English. This is a concern shared by Swan (2018), who states that '…we often fall into the… trap [of] get[ting] learners building houses right away, but assume that the various supplies needed will magically materialize…at the right times and in the right quantities. This is a precarious assumption' (p. 258). Here, however, very much depends on whether Swan is referring to a 'strong version' of TBLT whereby learners may use any language they wish to achieve the task (Willis, 1996) or a 'weaker version' of task-supported teaching, in which tasks act as the production stage of a PPP lesson following the introduction of target forms (Ellis, 2003). Personally, I feel that the latter – combining a scaffolded approach to learning the necessary structures with the extended opportunity to develop their communication skills that tasks often afford – can be successful even for less proficient learners, while the former, more dogmatic approach may be more suitable for more proficient learners.

Swan also suggests that there can be a mismatch between the problems faced by learners and the solutions offered by TBLT (2018: 251), or indeed by any one methodology. In my experience, this mismatch is best exemplified during my time at a large language school in Tokyo where learners met Swan's profile of 100 hours a year of classroom time and 'little out-of-class exposure' (p. 251). Despite this, the decision was made to move from a broader communicative approach to a 'weak' task-based curriculum with a focus on lexical chunks based on the assumption that Japanese learners had a good grounding in passive grammatical knowledge and merely required extensive productive practice to activate this. However, even if lower-level learners (CEFR A2 level and below) were familiar with particular constructions, many teachers complained that – without a natural order of acquisition from simple through to more complex forms – tasks were too complex for many learners to adequately achieve without certain linguistic foundations.

This view is, for me, one of the key issues with TBLT. When I first began teaching task-based lessons in my second year of teaching, I lacked the understanding of how tasks should be set up by the teacher or achieved by the learners, the awareness of how to identify and exploit relevant emergent language, and the ability to provide actionable feedback which could benefit my learners. However, while I was provided with intensive training and developmental observations to ensure I could teach task-based lessons adequately, having since observed many teachers in a range of contexts I would argue that many issues regarding TBLT come from a similar lack of knowledge. The successful implementation of TBLT lessons requires teachers with a good grasp of how these lessons are designed to be taught yet, in my experience, this is often not the case. Indeed, the common complaint that TBLT is 'too difficult' often comes from teachers who misunderstand what constitutes task achievement and who may actually be unwittingly 'rais[ing] the difficulty level of the tasks by imposing unnatural, or excessive demands on their students' language output' (Van de Branden, 2006: 230).

An additional barrier to successful TBLT lessons that I have commonly encountered mirrors Swan's own views in his formative years regarding lesson materials: resentment that prescribed lesson materials are unsuitable or uninspiring, and the sense that teachers' own 'experience and ability [have] equipped [them] to do better' (p. 247). This belief, rather than the principles behind the lessons themselves, is often at the core of unsuccessful attempts to implement TBLT curricula. This is not to lay the blame at the foot of the teacher; it can be very difficult to accept the idea of 'presenting learners with complex, functional language tasks from the onset of a basic language course' (Van de Branden, 2006: 229). The onus is therefore on institutions to provide suitable training and resources

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to help ensure their teachers can teach an appropriate range of methodologies to best meet the needs of the learners.

It is unfortunate yet understandable that few novice teachers are blessed with Swan-like levels of motivation to spend 'much of [their] spare time in libraries studying…contemporary language-teaching methodology' (p. 246), but the larger issue at hand is the lack of teacher awareness of relevant literature to support their professional development. Books aimed at teachers are 'not always easy to understand' (p. 247) and, despite the wealth of academic journals in existence, they are not often available to the average teacher due to an understandable reluctance to pay for subscriptions themselves or due to a sheer lack of awareness of their existence; few teaching institutions – in my experience – provide much in the way of useful literature or encourage their teachers to read as part of their development.

Although ten years have passed since I first took interest in reading about my profession, I can vividly remember feeling overwhelmed by the number of seemingly contrasting theories and principles; indeed, Swan also cites this still as 'a major problem' for many teachers (p. 248). This is, perhaps, a principal factor in teachers deciding to go with their own instincts regarding what works, what gets a good reaction, and what engages learners, rather than selecting a methodology based on research and sound teaching principles. Despite Swan's assertion that the 'theory-practice gap is narrowing' (p. 252), it makes little difference what researchers may discover if practitioners are unable or unwilling to teach lessons according to the principles which lie behind the teaching approach.

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