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Contents

Thanks and Acknowledgements vi

Why I wrote this book viii

A: Natural methods 1

1 Total Immersion 2
2 The Natural Method/Approach 6
3 The Direct Method 10
4 The Oral Method 14
5 The Reading Method 18
6 The Audiolingual Method 22
7 Total Physical Response 26

B: Linguistic methods 30

8 *Explication de Texte* 31
9 Text Memorization 35
10 Grammar-Translation 39
11 The Lexical Approach 43
12 Text-based Instruction 47
13 The Comparative Method 51

C: Communicative methods 55

14 The Situational Approach 56
15 Communicative Language Teaching 60
16 Task-based Language Teaching 64
17 Competency-based Teaching 68
18 Whole Language Learning 72
19 Content-based Instruction 76
20 Dogme ELT/ Teaching Unplugged 80

D: Visionaries 84

21 Community Language Learning 85
22 Suggestopedia 89
23 The Silent Way 93
24 Crazy English & the Rassias Method 97

E: Self-study methods 101

25 Orientalists 102
26 Prendergast's 'Mastery System' 106
27 Brand name Methods: Assimil, Michel Thomas, Pimsleur 110
28 Programmed Instruction: Duolingo 114
29 Online Polyglots 118

F: Beyond methods 122

30 Principled Eclecticism 123

Index 127

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Scott Thornbury

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Why I wrote this book

'Another book about methods? I thought methods were dead. I thought we were now in a post-method era.'

It's true that the concept of 'method' is generally shunned in the literature on language teaching nowadays. Even as long ago as 1969, L.G. Kelly, in his survey of language teaching over the last 25 centuries, contended that 'methods are of little interest'. In similar fashion, H. H. Stern (1983) announced 'a break with the method concept', due in part to the failure of researchers to find any significant advantage in one method over another. In 1990, N.S. Prabhu wrote an influential paper called 'There is no best method – why?' and in the following year Dick Allwright published another called 'The Death of Method'.

Subsequently, B. Kumaravadivelu (1994) identified what he called the 'postmethod condition', a result of 'the widespread dissatisfaction with the conventional concept of method'. At around the same time, Adrian Holliday (1994) was arguing the case for 'appropriate methodology' which must, first and foremost, be sensitive to the local culture – something which imported methods are probably not.

Nevertheless, in the popular imagination at least, faith in the idea of method persists. Websites advertising new and improved methods for language learning abound. Here are some promotional slogans taken at random:

> Learning a foreign language is easy with the XXX Method.
> The highly acclaimed YYY Method lets you pick up a new language naturally.
> Over a period of more than 15 years, ZZZ has developed and perfected a unique method of teaching languages.

What's more, training courses regularly include a component on the history of language teaching methods. Teachers in general are intrigued by the variety of methods that have been proposed, and are often keen to experiment with them. Indeed, as D. Bell (2007) discovered, when he canvassed a number of teachers, 'methods, however the term is defined, are not dead. Teachers seem to be aware of both the usefulness of methods and the need to go beyond them'.

One attraction of methods is that they offer coherent templates for generating classroom routines. The method helps structure what – to both teachers and learners – is a potentially haphazard experience. It provides answers to questions like: *Where do I start? What materials and activities should I use? In what order? To what end?* For novice teachers, in particular, methods offer a lifeline. For more experienced teachers, they offer a toolkit. As Richards and Rodgers (2014) put it, 'methods can be studied not as prescriptions for how to teach but as a source of well-used practices, which teachers can adapt or implement based on their own needs'.

Of course, a method is of not much use if we don't believe in it – if, in Prabhu's (1990) terms, it contravenes a teacher's 'sense of plausibility'. Methods are underpinned by beliefs about learning and language and, even if these are not always made explicit, we need to feel in harmony with them.

But if the method does fit, if it does resonate with our beliefs, then it has every chance of working – not because it is intrinsically sound (remember 'there is no best method'), but because it confers on a teacher a degree of confidence in his or her own efficacy. Jane Spiro (2013) puts it very well: 'The critical factor in success is the commitment and belief of the teacher in the methods he or she is using, and the continuing reflection of the teacher as to whether these methods are making a positive difference'.

This book, then, aims to unpack – not just the history of methods – but the beliefs that underpin them and the benefits that still might possibly accrue from experimenting with them.

Some notes on terminology

Not all the methods included in this book have *method* as part of their label: some are called *approaches*, and one is simply a *way*. But they are all consistent with David Nunan's (2003) definition: 'A language teaching method is a single set of procedures which teachers are to follow in the classroom. Methods are usually based on a set of beliefs about the nature of language and learning'. Researchers are quick to point out, of course, that no two teachers will implement a method in exactly the same way – hence the idea of a method being 'a single set of procedures' is necessarily an idealized one. For this reason, I am ignoring the distinction that is often made between *method* and *approach,* because, in terms of what happens in actual classrooms, it is of little consequence.

Methodology, on the other hand, is a more general term to characterize the classroom procedures and activities that teachers select – such as error correction, group work, or video viewing – and the way that these are managed, irrespective of the specific method that they subscribe to.

How this book is organized

Most training courses and methodology texts include a section on 'the history of methods' and this typically takes the form of a 'modernist' narrative, i.e. one of uninterrupted progress from 'darkness into light'. In actual fact, a closer reading of the history suggests that this account is over-simplified, and that methods not only co-exist, often for long periods of time, but are continuously re-invented out of the same basic ingredients. This book, then, aims to counteract the traditional narrative by grouping methods according to what they have in common, even if separated in time, and to dispel the view that methods 'die' and no longer have anything to offer us.

The choice of methods to include has been motivated by a number of factors: primarily, the strength of their influence over time (e.g. the Direct Method, Communicative Language Teaching), but, conversely, their relative failure to gain wider acceptance, despite their intrinsic merits (e.g. the Comparative Method, text memorization). Rehabilitating these 'lost methods' because of what they still might have to offer us has been another reason I wrote this book. Also included are those ways in which people learn languages that are not classroom-based, thereby stretching Nunan's definition (above) to extend to self-study and even immersion. At the same time, this book does not hope to be exhaustive, neither in terms of the methods that it covers nor in terms of the detail with which each one is described. Space simply does not permit.

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Despite these limitations, it is hoped that you will not only have a broader understanding of the enormous variety of ways that languages are – and have been – learned, but also be in a better position to evaluate some current practices – a necessary step in our continued professional development.

Abbreviations

To save space, and repetition, here is a list of common abbreviations used in this book:

EFL = English as a foreign language

ELF = English as a lingua franca

ESL = English as a second language

ELT = English language teaching

L1 = first language/mother tongue
L2 = second (or additional) language

SLA = second language acquisition

TESOL = teaching English to speakers of other languages

Bell, D. (2007) Do teachers think that methods are dead? *ELT Journal,* 61: 135–143.

Holliday, A. (1994) *Appropriate Methodology and Social Context.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kelly, L.G. (1969) *25 Centuries of Language Teaching: 500 BC – 1969*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (1994) The Postmethod condition: (E)merging strategies for second/ foreign language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly,* 28: 27–48.

Nunan, D. (ed.) (2003) *Practical English Language Teaching.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Prabhu, N.S. (1990) There is no best method – why? *TESOL Quarterly,* 24:161–176.

Richards, J. C. and Rodgers, T.S. (2014) *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching (3rd edition).* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Stern, H.H. (1983) *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

A: Natural methods

This first section looks at a number of methods that are loosely characterized as being 'natural' – in the sense that they replicate, or aim to replicate – the processes by which first languages are acquired, or by which second languages are picked up without any formal instruction.

1 **Total Immersion**
2 **The Natural Method/Approach**
3 **The Direct Method**
4 **The Oral Method**
5 **The Reading Method**
6 **The Audiolingual Method**
7 **Total Physical Response**

1 Total Immersion

What more natural way of learning an additional language than immersing yourself in the culture that speaks it? It is also the most widely practised way: more people have acquired a language through total immersion than by any other means.

The background

It may seem odd to begin a book on methods with a 'zero-method'. After all, total immersion pre-dates the concept of 'method' by several hundreds of millennia. Ever since people first moved – or were forced to move – away from their local speech community, they have come into contact with other languages. And, given time and motivation, they have learned them – often to impressive levels of ability. Hence, total immersion supplies the benchmark against which the success of all other methods can be measured.

Take 'Julie', for instance. Julie was a British woman who married an Egyptian and settled in Cairo aged 21. She never attended classes in Egyptian Arabic, and could not read or write in it, but within just two and a half years she was able to 'pass' as a native speaker of the language. How was she able to achieve this? Probably because she was totally immersed in Arabic. As the researchers who studied her (Ioup et al 1994) describe it:

> Nine days after arrival, her husband was unexpectedly called to military service and she was left with non-speaking-English relatives for 45 days. Since there was no one to assist her in English, she relied on context and gesture to interpret utterances and express meaning. Thus, at this initial stage her language acquisition situation resembled the environment for child L1 acquisition.

By the time her husband returned she was able to communicate with her in-laws using simple sentences and idiomatic expressions and, after

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six months, she was fairly fluent. The immersion process continued when she took a job in an Egyptian school, and, after three years in Egypt, she no longer used English with her husband or children: Arabic had, effectively, become the home language (although her children did grow up bilingual).

Julie's case is only exceptional in that, despite being a late starter, she achieved a degree of proficiency in her second language that is relatively unusual in adults. But the situation of being suddenly immersed in a language and having to pick it up 'naturalistically' is one that is familiar to most immigrants, even if they don't always 'pass' as native speakers. And, while it may be arguable whether immersion is a 'method' as such, there is a widespread view – supported by stories such as Julie's – that, if you have to learn a second language, then the best thing you can do is hop on a plane and go to the country where the language is spoken. Many 'off the shelf' methods, such as the **Natural Method** (see chapter **2**), in fact, attempt to simulate the immersion experience.

Of course, not all naturalistic (i.e. non-instructed) learners are successful. In another seminal case study of an immigrant's command of English, 'Alberto', an adult Costa Rican who had been living in Boston for a year and a half, was incapable of producing anything more than very basic ('pidginized') English. This was attributed to his lack of integration into the dominant English-speaking culture. Conversely, in another case study (Schmidt 1983), an adult Japanese immigrant ('Wes') living in Hawaii, who was seemingly well integrated, also showed little language development over the three years he was studied. He did, however, achieve impressive levels of communicative effectiveness, such that many who knew him rated his English favourably. (English teachers, on the other hand, were less impressed!)

How does it work?

Total immersion on its own seems to be less effective than total immersion *plus*. That is to say, as well as round-the-clock exposure, there needs to be some 'push' for greater precision, and there needs to be some focused attention on form. (It's probably the lack of both that accounts for the limited language development in the case of both Alberto and Wes.)

For example, to help her cope with the initial experience of total immersion, Julie kept a notebook in which she jotted down any words or expressions she could make sense of. She started to include grammatical information, such as verb endings, too. But, at this initial stage, of most use were formulaic ‘chunks’, which gave her a toe-hold into real communication. She also took (grateful) note of the corrections and re-phrasings that her relatives offered her when communication broke down.

In similar vein, another self-taught learner, the Chilean Marcos Kreutzberger (better known as the TV personality Don Francisco) devised a number of proactive strategies for learning English when he was ‘immersed’ in New York, aged 19. On the streets of the city, for example, he would seek out ‘older people who didn’t seem to be in a hurry’, and, on the pretext of asking directions, initiate a conversation. He would write down any new words that might come up in a personal lexicon for later recycling. He supplemented this routine by watching TV, reading newspapers ‘and trying to translate everything that was going on’ (Kreutzberger 2007). He adds:

> The system really worked for me. After 90 days I could navigate pretty well, and after a year I felt I had enough ability to join in conversations and understand almost everything being said.

Does it work?

For Julie and Marcos, immersion was clearly successful. For Wes less so, and for Alberto hardly at all. What made the difference? As mentioned, the use of deliberate strategies to filter and record the input, to pay attention to corrections, and to plan subsequent exchanges, all seemed to play an important part in the success of Julie and Marcos. Just as important may have been their willingness to take risks, which, in turn, may have been driven by sheer necessity: in Julie’s case in particular, she had no choice but to learn Arabic.

Of course, Julie and Marcos were successful *speakers* of their target languages. But we don’t know a lot about their reading and writing skills. Whereas total immersion can lead to very high levels of proficiency in oracy (speaking and listening), literacy skills typically lag behind. This is because, outside of an academic context, learners simply

don't get the exposure to written text, or the practice producing it, that literacy requires.

What's in it for us?

The idea that classroom instruction can be adapted so as to replicate the conditions of total immersion is a seductive, but ultimately doomed, one. For a start, we have seen that only highly motivated and resourceful learners may truly benefit from a total immersion experience. More realistically, it is virtually impossible to recreate the all day, every day quantity of exposure that total immersion provides. On the other hand, technological innovations have exponentially increased contact opportunities outside the classroom. Training learners in the strategies that enable them to take advantage of these opportunities may be one way forward. These could include using online means to interact with speakers of the target language through websites such as 'HelloTalk' (www.hellotalk.com), for example.

Ioup, G., Boustagoui, E., Tigi, M., & Moselle, M. (1994) Reexamining the critical period hypothesis: a case of a successful adult SLA in a naturalistic environment. *Studies in SLA,* 16: 73–98.

Kreutzberger, M. (2007) Don Francisco's Six Steps to Better English. In Miller, T. (ed.) *How I learned English,* Washington, DC: National Geographic.

Schmidt, R. (1983) Interaction, acculturation and the acquisition of communicative competence. In Wolfson, N., & Judd, E. (eds.) *Sociolinguistics and Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

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2 The Natural Method/Approach

Total immersion works because, like first language acquisition, it is 'natural'. That, at least, is the argument made by proponents of the so-called natural methods.

The background

It's fair to say that the history of language teaching has swung back and forth between just two poles. On the one hand, there have been methods that take the position that additional languages have to be *learned* – through the application of some kind of mental effort. This is because additional languages are not picked up on our mother's knee, as it were. At the other extreme are the methods that are grounded in the belief that, given the right conditions, additional languages *can* be acquired in the same way we acquired our mother tongue. Because they attempt to replicate at least some of the conditions of uninstructed acquisition, these latter methods are loosely grouped together as 'natural methods'. Over time, one or two have explicitly labelled themselves as being the Natural Method, or the Natural Approach.

Perhaps the strongest argument supporting natural approaches is not that we learned our first language naturally, but that many, many people have learned a second language naturally – that is, without formal instruction but solely through contact with speakers of the language – in a manner often referred to as naturalistic learning (see chapter **1 Immersion**). For early scholars, naturalistic learning was equated to 'learning through conversation'. As the enlightenment philosopher John Locke put it, in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693): 'The Original way of Learning a language by Conversation, not only serves well enough, but is to be prefer'd as the most Expedite, Proper, and Natural'.

One of the first attempts to formalize such a philosophy for the teaching of modern languages was instituted by a teacher of French. In a book

called *Causeries avec mes élèves* (*Conversations with my students,* 1874a), Lambert Sauveur describes the first lesson: 'It is a conversation during two hours *in the French language* with twenty persons who know nothing of this language. After five minutes only, I am carrying on a dialogue with them, and this dialogue does not cease'. Sauveur opened a language school in Boston and before long his conversation-based method had attracted a great deal of attention and became known as the Natural Method.

Almost exactly a century later, Tracy Terrell, a teacher of Spanish in California, proposed a 'natural approach' to teaching second languages. Drawing on the distinction made by Stephen Krashen between *learning* (i.e. conscious study), on the one hand, and, on the other, *acquisition* (i.e. unconscious 'absorption' of the language through exposure and use), Terrell argued that communicative competence could be achieved in the classroom, not through learning-type activities, but through activities that fostered 'natural' acquisition. Such activities would be *communicative*, in that the focus would be entirely on meaning – initially simply understanding meaningful input, and then producing meaningful output. Perhaps more firmly grounded in research than Sauveur's method, the Natural Approach nevertheless shares many of its basic principles.

How does it work?

In his *Introduction to the Teaching of Living Languages Without Grammar or Dictionary* (1874b), Sauveur explains the principle underpinning his 'conversations':

> I raise quickly my finger before you, and show it to you. Do you not understand, whatever your language may be, that that means *there is the finger*? And if I point my extended forefinger towards the table or the door, do you not understand that I say, *There is the table; there is the door*? And if, on showing you the finger, I say in my French language *Voilà le doigt* , do you not understand that the French pronounce these words to indicate that thing?

Simply by extending this idea almost indefinitely, Sauveur was able to weave conversations out of the 'here-and-now', with the learners responding minimally at first, but participating more fully as they

became familiar with the material. The ultimate aim was that the learners would be able to interact with one another with minimal reliance on the teacher. Although the conversations were available in print form, Sauveur discouraged teachers from using the book in class: 'Give the pupils the book to read at home as preparation for your teaching, but forbid them to open it in the class; their ear alone must be occupied there'.

In similar fashion, Terrell's approach involves exposing learners to 'comprehensible input', e.g. in the form of commands (see chapter **7 Total Physical Response**) and question-and-answer routines using real objects or visuals, to which the learners (unlike Sauveur's learners) are allowed to respond using their L1. Production is withheld until learners feel ready, and grammar explanation and error correction (being associated with learning and not with acquisition) are discouraged. Activities likely to cause stress or anxiety are also avoided, since, according to Terrell (1977) 'affective (not cognitive) factors are primary forces operating in language acquisition'.

Does it work?

Apart from the attention that Sauveur's method attracted at the time, its effectiveness was not really put to the test: we only have his word for it. He reports, for example, a class whose conversation, after four and a half months of five two-hour lessons a week, was 'so animated and so interesting' that, listening to them, he thought he was back in France. Certainly, compared to the prevailing grammar-translation methodology of the time, his Natural Method must have been a breath of fresh air. So, too, in its own way, was Terrell's Natural Approach, contrasting as it did with the forced production and rigorous correction associated with audiolingualism. However, in its outright rejection of learning-type classroom procedures, such as error correction, the Natural Approach might have let the pendulum swing too far in the direction of acquisition. The classroom, after all, is not a 'natural' context for language learning: apart from anything else, the amount of real exposure and practice that individual learners get is inevitably limited. At best, so-called natural approaches might serve as a relatively stress-free introduction to a language, after which more conventional methods might take over.

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What's in it for us?

Despite those caveats, there is a lot to be learned from natural acquisition, whether of the first language or of an additional one. Basing language learning on 'conversations' (however we define these) makes a certain sense. As a number of researchers have observed, the grammar of first language acquisition *emerges* out of the conversations that the child has with his or her caregivers. Grammar is not a prerequisite for these conversations. It follows, therefore, that an approach to second language learning that foregrounds conversation might provide a fertile environment for the emergence of the second language grammar – especially if the conversations are 'enhanced' with explicit attention to the formal features of the language. So-called 'instructional conversations' are central to approaches that view learning as socially constructed, and mediated by talk – 'so that the knowledge that is created carries with it echoes of the conversations in which it was generated' (Mercer 1995).

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