# Language teaching methodology and teacher education: Trends and issues
## *An interview with Alan Waters*

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**A**dopting appropriate teaching methods and designing suitable teaching materials are among the major concerns of language teachers around the world. Although many teachers are eager to find the 'best' or most effective ways of teaching, there are no easy answers, given the wide range of sociopolitical contexts in which teaching takes place. In this interview, Alan Waters, a leading expert in English language teaching (ELT) from Lancaster University, talks about the trends and issues surrounding language teaching methodology, materials design, as well as teacher education in ELT. With extensive experience in the field, Alan has taught English as a foreign language and taken part in teacher training projects in various parts of the world, and has published several books and numerous journal articles. He is interested in all the main aspects of the theory and practice of ELT.

**Matthew Sung (MS):** What do you think have been the major changes in ELT methodology over the last two decades or so? What main challenges do they present for our profession?

**Alan Waters (AW):** In answer to the first of these questions, I think it depends on whether you are talking about theoretical or practical developments. As I have tried to explain in a paper on the subject that appeared in *ELT Journal* in October last year (Waters, 2012), if you look at the 'professional discourse' (major publications, conference presentations, electronic discussions, and so on), the main theoretical developments over the last 20 years or so range from the 'post-method condition' (the idea that prescribed ways of teaching such as Audiolingualism are not a credible basis for methodology), through 'appropriate methodology' (the idea that the most effective kind of methodology will be based on the sociocultural norms of the teaching situation) to, ironically enough, a renewal of 'methodism', one caused by the way that a 'communicating to learn' approach is increasingly advocated as the single best method. In the latter approach, learners use language to solve problems and (in theory, at any rate) acquire a knowledge of grammar and so on as a by-product of the communication work. Examples of methods based on

this approach are the *strong* form of task-based learning and teaching, Content and Language-Integrated Learning, and so on. So strongly has a 'communicating to learn' approach been advocated by the professional discourse over the last 10–15 years that Prodromou and Mishan (2008) refer to it as "methodological correctness" (pp. 193–194).

However, if you look at the practice side of the matter, a rather different picture emerges. Of course, it is difficult to generalize about what actually happens at the classroom level in terms of methodology, for all sorts of reasons there isn't space to go into here, unfortunately (though see the paper of mine referred to above). But it can be argued that major international course books (sets of published teaching materials), because of their popularity and the way their design is based to a great extent on feedback from practitioners, provide a way of getting some kind of idea of what a large number of teachers, working in a wide range of situations around the world, regard as effective methodology at the practice (i.e., classroom) level. Now, if you look at the kind of methodology that is in editions of books like this, such as the *New Headway* series, from about 15 years ago (Soars & Soars, 1996) and then compare it with the one in more recent editions of the same book (Soars & Soars, 2009), as I did as part of the research for the same paper already referred to, you find (a) the methodology in both editions hasn't really changed much at all over the years, and (b) it is mainly a 'learning to communicate' one in nature—in other words, first the grammar and so on is studied, and then there are lots of practice exercises and skills-based activities to help the learners gradually put it into practice.

As should be obvious, these conclusions show that there has been very little development over the last 20 years or so at the practice level, despite the very different kind of methodology that has been advocated at the theoretical level over the same period. There are various possible reasons for this state of affairs, of course, but in my view the main one is the continuing hegemony of the 'native-speakerist' concept of foreign language learning (Holliday, 2006). By this I mean that the native speakers who dominate the professional discourse tend to advocate a form of language teaching methodology based on the L1 experience of learning English, that is, a 'naturalistic' approach occurring in an L1 environment. But such a learning context is, of course, almost the opposite of the typical classroom-based EFL situation.

To try to also answer the second question, it therefore seems to me that the main challenge which this state of affairs presents to our profession is how to somehow adopt an overall perspective on language learning and teaching which is much more 'grounded' in the prevailing realities of ELT as it occurs in most parts of the world—an overall view that is much more 'English as foreign language'-oriented, rather than 'native-speakerist', in other words. There is certainly good, solid, classroom-based research evidence to support a 'learning to communicate' approach (see, e.g., Lightbown & Spada, 2006, pp. 179–180), whereas there is also a lack of evidence to support the use of a 'communicating to learn' approach for the development of new language knowledge (see, e.g., Swan, 2005). So the problem is not a shortage of empirical data on the matter. Rather, in my view, it is the relatively lack of 'voice' given to the 'ordinary' practitioner in a profession increasingly dominated by top-down academic ideology (Waters, 2009b). Ironically, however, because of their relative power and authority, academics themselves are probably those who are in the best position to reverse this state of affairs, by doing more to critically question hegemonic viewpoints about 'common-sense' methodological practices, and by conducting more research of their own which looks at ELT methodology from a more 'bottom-up' perspective (such as in the example of the analysis of the two *New Headway* editions outlined above).

**MS:** Your mention of teaching materials just now prompts me to ask how you see this aspect of ELT in relation to current trends in theorizing and research?

**AW:** Well, I think the first thing to say is that teaching materials, especially in the form of course books, even though they are one of the main and most important features of most ELT classrooms, have hardly been 'on the map' at all in terms of applied linguistics until relatively recently. This is because they have traditionally been viewed with suspicion from an academic point of view. Thus, in Allwright (1981), a very influential article, it was argued that, since research shows that classroom learning opportunities occur as a result of unpredictable interaction among the learners and between them and the teacher and the teaching materials, course books and so on cannot in any way predetermine what learning will actually take place. This lent support to the view that teaching materials were

only of very limited value, and that whenever possible, learning would be better without them—the position adhered to by approaches such as 'Dogme' language teaching (Meddings & Thornbury, 2009). However, as research discussed in Hutchinson and Hutchinson (1996) shows (cf. Prabhu, 1992), course books can play an important role in reducing the unpredictability of classroom interaction to manageable proportions, thereby enhancing the potential for uptake of learning opportunities, and they can also play an important educational role beyond the classroom as well.

Subsequently, there has been greater interest in the study of teaching materials on the part of applied linguistics. However, this has tended to take the form of bemoaning the extent to which they do not conform to the findings of second language acquisition (SLA) studies (see, e.g., Tomlinson, 2001), even though experts in SLA themselves do not regard the findings as so far providing a basis for prescribing language teaching methodology (see, e.g., Ellis, 2009). Another strand of theorizing sees course books as potential 'Trojan horses' for free-market economics and other sociocultural values, which are seen to be negative (see, e.g., Gray, 2010), and evaluates them accordingly. Thus, although the course book and other kinds of teaching materials are at last becoming more of an object of study within applied linguistics, the approach is still largely a top-down, 'linguistics applied' one, rather than being based on attempting, in the first instance, to come to terms with teaching materials in their own right, that is, a more bottom-up, 'theorizing from the classroom' stance, although there are some recent, more heartening signs of such 'materials research' being attempted by Dr. Richard Smith and his associates at the University of Warwick, England (see < tinyurl.com/cpkrczc>; cf. Waters, 2009a). It seems to me that, in fact, such a grass-roots approach ought to be the starting and end point of all ELT research, that is, we need to be sure that, in the first instance, we understand the rationales behind current pedagogic practices, and whatever other theoretical perspectives we also bring to bear on the matter need to take into account the context in which the form of ELT being studied operates. From such a perspective, rather than all ELT course books being dismissed out of hand as woefully atheoretical, as tends to occur at present, it might instead be possible to see how different designs of them give rise to different pedagogic possibilities, and for theory to thereby be informed by

practice as much as vice-versa—a much more desirable state of affairs, in my view.

**MS:** In-service teacher training programmes have been in place in many countries in order to help teachers face change in the curriculum. How effective are these training programmes in helping language teachers acquire new teaching ideas and cope with the implementation of these innovative ideas?

**AW:** Unfortunately, there is plenty of research evidence to show that in-service training (INSET) programmes are frequently ineffective (see, e.g., Waters & Vilches, 2012, p. 3). However, they do have the potential to be a vital part of helping teachers to cope with the seemingly never-ending stream of educational innovations so many of them are on the receiving end of these days, so it is important for them to be as effective as possible. One way of attempting to make this the case is to identify what tends to go wrong in INSET at present, and to then try to re-design it in such a way as to lessen or prevent the problems from occurring.

Some recent research in this area that I have been involved in (see Waters & Vilches, 2012, pp. 4–5) shows that there are usually two main problems with INSET:

1. the content tends to compromise top-down teaching ideas, which are often impracticable at the classroom level;

2. lack of support for post-training, school-based implementation efforts.

As the research findings in Waters and Vilches (ibid.) indicate, to solve the first problem, the development of new teaching ideas 'needs to start from where people are' (Wedell, 2009, p. 177). In other words, while being open to innovation, curriculum development should be rooted firmly in the realities of the typical classroom, such as the level of knowledge and skills of teachers and their conditions of service, the motivation and abilities of the learners, the role of the assessment system, the resources available, and so on. Without being based on a foundation of this kind, the content of INSET has little hope of being successfully implemented.

The second problem occurs mainly because the amount of time, energy, understanding, motivation and support needed for teachers to successfully implement new teaching ideas tends to be woefully underestimated. As the same study of ours already mentioned indicates (pp. 16–21), for this problem to be avoided, it is important that

the following aspects (among others) are paid careful attention to:

- making sure the teaching institution authorities have sufficient understanding of and commitment to the new teaching ideas;
- providing teaching materials which incorporate the new teaching ideas;
- enabling teachers to collaborate closely during the implementation process in order to provide mutual support, jointly solve 'teething' problems, and so on;
- regular, systematic and supportive observation of and feedback on teachers' attempts to implement the new ideas.

So, in a nutshell, making INSET work more effectively means, above all, working with appropriate teaching ideas in the first place, and then providing the proper kind of follow-up support for putting them into practice.

**MS:** Thank you for sharing your thoughts about these topics with us!

**AW:** My pleasure—thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to do so!

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