

Schools of thought

Chris Payne examines the extent to which the English taught in private language schools caters for students' needs.

Please finish the following sentence, using your own words:

Language is ...

Several words may spring to mind, but some responses that I have been given are: *culture, identity* and, overwhelmingly, *communication* and *meaning*. Yet what if I were to complete the sentence myself as:

Language is passing exams?

There's a good chance that I would be asked to justify such a seemingly outmoded comment.

Teaching

Private language schools usually have smaller class sizes than state schools, so it is more feasible for teachers to use tasks and adopt a communicative approach to teaching if they so wish. In fact, the private sector tends to be associated with umbrella terms such as 'direct method' and 'communicative language teaching' (CLT). Many teachers of English who work in private language schools around the world are proponents of a communicative approach. In my own teaching, I use ideas from task-based learning (TBL), which can be said to be a 'strong' version of the communicative approach. I also regularly implement lexical approach ideas and help students use English for a real communicative purpose. A lexical approach places communication of meaning at the heart of language and learning, in the tradition of the communicative approach. However, I feel that although I help students learn to communicate in English by using the

aforementioned approaches, some of their ideas about content do not take into account the day-to-day needs of students, especially in the area of sentence grammar.

Learning

My particular experience is in Spain, predominantly in the private sector, but I have also taught in the Spanish state system.

Why do students attend private schools? Many do enrol in order to acquire a high level of English so that it can be used for real communication. But this is not the whole story. I would like to disabuse you of the popular belief that all students in private schools are highly-motivated learners who strive to communicate in English. This may be the case for adult learners, and indeed many children are undoubtedly keen to learn. However, a considerable number of the children enrolled by their parents attend against their will. For these students, it entails further study after they have already completed a full day at school, and they bring little intrinsic motivation to the classroom. Their main motivation is extrinsic, that is, driven by external factors such as passing exams and parental pressure.

Many parents ostensibly enrol their children so that they learn English for meaningful communication, but if they achieve this aim and then fail an exam at school, something is drastically wrong. Regrettably, some parents and students equate exam performance with level of English, and their mindset is that passing exams is the most important sign of making progress.

How many teachers know students who only really make an effort when an exam is approaching, either at school or in their language school?

Exams

If concern about passing exams sometimes overrides a desire to learn English for communication, shouldn't this be reflected in our teaching? We may dislike the fact that some learners are only motivated to study in order to pass an exam, but we must bear in mind that progress is still measured in terms of exam success by a substantial number of parents and students, and dare I say it, some teachers. It is quite possible that this state of affairs is applicable to other countries as well as Spain.

I suggest that if we genuinely care about the overall learning process of all of our students, we need to strike a balance between teaching learners what we *believe* they need for sound language acquisition and what they *actually* need for passing exams. Before I continue, I am at pains to point out that I do not propose a wholesale return to a grammar translation method. Nor do I espouse the idea of always teaching towards an exam.

Grammar

It seems that there are certain areas of teaching, primarily in grammar, that retain their currency on state or private school syllabuses, but are disliked by some distinguished linguists. Let us look at some of these evergreen grammar points that might be said to conflict with a more communicative approach to learning.

Dave Willis favours task-based learning and a meaning-based syllabus. In *The Lexical Syllabus*, he states that the passive and the second conditional have been elevated to an undeserved level of importance and that reported speech was artificially created in the name of pedagogy. A few years later, in *The Lexical Approach*, Michael Lewis goes even further by suggesting that first, second and third conditionals, the passive voice and reported speech could unquestionably be deleted from grammar teaching. The reason he adduces is that they lend themselves to convoluted transformation exercises which have no place in the classroom because they practise language that has simply been mis-analysed in the first place.

We might agree with the acerbic comments of Willis and Lewis, but we need to realise that it is precisely grammar like that mentioned above which is often tested in exams. If students need to know it, it is patently useful for them to study it. By extension, if the primary aim of students is to pass a written exam, communicative competence can be perceived by some as being of limited use.

Generally in Spain, written exams still predominate at school, although in some schools importance is also attached to testing oral and listening skills. The 'Selectividad', which is the Spanish university entrance examination, comprises only a written paper in English. A mandatory oral component will be introduced in 2012. The written paper commonly requires students to transform sentences from

We need to strike a balance between teaching learners what we believe they need for sound language acquisition and what they actually need for passing exams

active voice into passive voice, and from direct speech into reported speech. It is not uncommon for linguists to inveigh against the teaching of reported speech, yet it is interesting that it is also included in transformation exercises in the exams set by internationally recognised examination boards.

Tuition

In the absence of an overarching litmus test of quality and appropriateness in ELT, we need to remember that there are schools, both state and private, that are still firmly entrenched in a structuralist tradition. Until the spell of grammar influence is broken, the perhaps uncomfortable reality is that a large number of students will still need to do meaningless transformation exercises in order to pass exams. Therefore, if we really consider ourselves to be learner-centred, we ought to accept the situation without demur and re-examine the role

sentence grammar and exams play in the lives of our students and their parents, who are, of course, stakeholders in their children's English tuition. If students need practice for exam-type questions, they should have it, even though we might think time is better spent doing other more communicative activities. For most students, getting a good mark in English is more important than our noble and lofty thoughts on methodology.

Balance

The most sensible approach is to balance helping our students practise language that is relevant to the requirements of an exam or syllabus with offering them favourable conditions for acquiring English for communication. However unfashionable and questionable teaching certain grammar may seem to us, we should not feel guilty, as it is not an abdication of duty to teach something that is both useful for and needed by our students.



I would advocate that teachers in private language schools carry on with their principled eclecticism, but that in addition to helping students learn to communicate in English, we also remember to focus on the traditional grammar that is still necessary for many to succeed in exams. We could adopt a dual approach in which we are proactive and reactive. Being proactive is well suited to communicative tasks and teaching lexis selectively. Being reactive and aware of students' needs can help them with pronunciation difficulties such as stress and intonation, and common grammar points, such as the ones already discussed.

Hopefully, it's food for thought. 

Lewis, M *The Lexical Approach* LTP 1993
Willis, D *The Lexical Syllabus* Collins 1990



Chris Payne is the owner of Paddington School of English. He has been teaching in Spain since 1993 and is a Cambridge oral examiner trainer for examiners of young learners. He is especially interested in a greater focus on lexis in language learning.

paddington@terra.es