Tidy teaching, messy learning

Adrian Tennant

argues for a more organic approach.

I guess we've all experienced it: the moment we realise that none of our students has actually learnt what we've been teaching them. It's not that they haven't learnt anything; it's simply that we've focused on one particular thing, but they seem to have learnt other things. Clearly, these other things must have been in the lesson, but to us they were incidental, only part of the bigger picture. So what's going on?

It is often at these moments that we start questioning ourselves as teachers: Do I know what I'm doing? Am I any good? What's wrong with my plan? Sometimes we have another perspective: Why aren't the students learning what I'm teaching them? Why can't they see what the aim is? What's wrong with them?

But maybe what we need to be doing is looking at what's going on in the relationship between teaching and learning.

Teaching and learning

To my mind, there is a fundamental difference between teaching and learning (at least between the way we usually teach in classrooms and the way in which people learn). Teaching is organised, it's linear; we start at the beginning, we go to the middle and we finish at the end. But learning isn't like that.

Teaching is tidy, learning is messy.

What do I mean by this? Well, let's look at a particular area of grammar that is taught at some point in every language classroom – the past simple (and in particular, the difference between regular and irregular verb forms).

In the majority of cases, teachers begin by introducing their students to the past simple forms of the regular verbs: *walked*, *talked*, *stopped*, etc. After all, this is logical, isn't it? There's an easy rule to learn and it can't be that hard. But then what do we do next? We start to confuse our students by teaching them irregular verbs: *went*, *wrote*, *got*, etc. How do we do this? Well, we tell them that these are exceptions. In other words, we teach them a rule and then we tell them to forget it – well, maybe not forget it, but certainly break it!

How confusing this must be for the students. What we've done is put ourselves (the teachers) before the students.

We start with things because they are easy to teach, not because they are easy to learn.

Wouldn't it be easier to teach the students irregular verbs first, and then tell them that for some verbs there's a rule? Instead of having to 'unlearn' something – the rule we've just taught them – they can keep building on existing knowledge.

The interesting thing is that when we look at the way young children learn English as a first language, this is exactly what we see. I know that some people will be jumping up and down by now, saying that we shouldn't be looking at first language acquisition for models to help us with second language acquisition, let alone second language teaching. But my question is: Why not?

Just look at this list of high-frequency verbs: *be*, *get*, *have*, *make*, *go*, *do*, *see*, *eat*, *drink* and *sleep*. Do you notice something? Of course you do; they're all irregular. Now I'm not saying there aren't any highly frequent verbs that are regular

(*walk*, *talk*, *play*, *start*, *finish*, etc) because that would be silly, but I'd hazard a guess that there are more irregular verbs in the list of the top 20 most-frequently-used verbs than regular ones. And surely, as teachers, one of the foundations of teaching is to focus on frequency as this often equates to usefulness.

Function over form, use and meaning over systems – that's got to be the way.

Let's look at another example, the infamous third person *s*. How difficult can this be? All you have to do is simply add an *s* (in most cases) to the end of a verb if the verb follows *he*, *she*, *it* or a proper noun. Not rocket science, is it? Well, no, but it's not very logical either. After all, it has no communicative purpose whatsoever. It's simply a remnant of the past, a hangover from the grammars of the some of the languages where English originates.

Now look at it from the viewpoint of the students. First of all, what function does it have? Not a lot. If you say a sentence without it, you're hardly likely to be misunderstood. Then there's the fact that most languages fall into one of two categories: either the verbs conjugate or they don't. In English, they do both and neither! Sure, the rule seems easy to teach, but the brain simply isn't equipped to learn something that appears to be both a rule and an exception. Of course, part of the issue is that the students are comparing and contrasting what they are learning with their own languages. Often people say that this is a problem, but what are they supposed to do?

When you learn anything, you reference it to what you already know, you try to fit it into a framework. Children learning their first language will use a framework constructed from the environment and from the responses they get to utterances they make – they will almost co-construct their own framework from the input they get. Bilingual children are often in a situation where their mum is using one language and their dad another. This gives them a framework within which to work – it gets messy when the two parents don't stick to 'their' language.

So, with students learning a second or additional language, the framework is bound to include the language, or languages, they already know. To discount this would be to hamper them in terms of building a system to work with.

When it comes to teaching, there are two constraints that need to be overcome.

The first is the linear nature of coursebooks and the second is the linear nature of lessons. Now, in both cases, this is not a criticism as such; I'm simply stating a fact. You start on page 1 of a coursebook unit, then you go to page 2, then 3, and so on. In good books, there's an element of recycling and an attempt to 'spiral', eg we teach the past simple at one level, then we come back to it at the next level and add an extra layer of complexity, etc. But in reality, this is still a line, just one that goes round rather than one that is straight. You're still starting at a point and progressing in a linear fashion.

The problem is that the brain doesn't function like that. The brain isn't linear.

Lessons are the same as coursebooks. Teachers start with X, then they go to Y and finally they end at Z. Often we talk about 'building' on things that have gone before. We use metaphors like building a house, starting with the foundations and then the walls, until finally we can put the roof on. But learning isn't so structured.

Learning is organic.

I've come across some coursebooks that attempt to combat this – they're modular – and the idea is that, like the novel *Finnegan's Wake* by James Joyce, you are supposed to be able to start anywhere and finish anywhere. It all sounds great, but it falls down in two respects. Firstly, printed and bound in a traditional book form there is still an obvious start, middle and end. Secondly, each module is linear in nature. You can't just dip in at any point, otherwise you aren't 'building on what's gone before'!

There's a human compulsion to be tidy, ordered and structured that seems almost impossible to ignore or overcome.

However, although this might explain why our students often don't learn what we teach them, what's the solution? Ah, well I'm working on that. I tried to write this article in an organic, untidy way, but somehow it became linear and organised. Maybe the problem is that I've been a teacher too long (although I'm still learning)! ETp

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