

ECLECTICISM IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Dr Diana Popova

Bourgas Free University, Bulgaria

Abstract

This article aims to provide a rationale for employing an eclectic approach to foreign language teaching when circumstances do not allow for the adoption of a single method. It is an invitation to practising teachers to appreciate the advantages of the well-thought out eclecticism in language instruction which could remedy a situation failed by blindly sticking to a fashionable trend in methodology.

This article, while acknowledging the complexities of balancing seemingly unmatching syllabuses and methodology, stresses the value of eclecticism for offering solutions to local situations. It is also concerned with the attitude of some leading theoreticians to eclecticism who claim that it can be employed in lesson organisation, course, syllabus and materials design.

The theory and practice of foreign language teaching (FLT) has seen and experienced, benefited and suffered, adopted and rejected many a new method. With the advantage of hindsight the achievements of linguists – theoreticians and practitioners - can now be critically reviewed only to find out that the teaching/learning of foreign languages has evolved through the centuries and outgrown the drawbacks of its ‘green years’. The 21st century is the century of the ‘fast lanes’. The bearing this has on education in general and FLT in particular is that the methods of teaching/learning should be such as to ensure effectiveness and quick returns. Learners of foreign languages nowadays are prepared to invest less time than before in learning a foreign language. However, they expect to become sufficiently competent in that language in order to be able to perform well under particular circumstances.

Experience has shown time and again that sticking blindly to a single ‘pure’ method or approach to FLT leads to marginal results and short-lived competencies in restricted areas of the foreign language practice. In countries like Bulgaria, where there has been an overwhelming demand for learning English coupled with quite a long and varied tradition in offering English language instruction, there are already several generations of people with English language competence who are the product of different approaches to teaching/learning it. More and more English language teachers come to realise that the contemporary learner needs a varied diet of language instruction and experience in order to achieve positive outcomes and become an independent user of English. This boils down to adopting an eclectic approach to learning and teaching, to syllabus and materials design, to the development of the four basic and the myriad of specific English language skills.

“...there has emerged a general movement toward eclecticism of picking and choosing some procedures from one methodology, some techniques from another, and some exercise formats from yet another. This approach seems to us to represent a reasonable response from the practising teacher who is typically concerned, on a day-to-day basis, with whether specific procedures or exercises seem to ‘work’ well for a particular group of students, rather than whether the lesson format might fit into some theory” (Tarone & Yule 1989: 10).

They go on to claim that effective eclecticism requires efforts and depends on the teacher's ability to choose materials and procedural steps on the basis of a set of principles. This is a very pertinent remark, which needs to be taken into consideration when choosing to employ an eclectic approach to foreign language teaching. A very careful consideration of balancing, complementing, systematising, creating a coherent and dynamic whole should precede any eclectic approach. Only then could the syllabus and materials designer be sure that the approach s/he has suggested can guarantee continuity in learning/teaching and inherent logic of the eclectic system.

Eclecticism has a very strong advantage to recommend it under various constrained circumstances. It "involves a philosophy of local solutions to local problems" (Tarone & Yule, 1989: 10). This certainly holds true of Bulgaria, and of any other country, in which English is studied as a foreign language, as the needs of the learners of English are concrete and originate under concrete conditions. They directly correspond to 'local' demands. 'Local' does not denote limited or of insignificant value, but real, felt and consciously realised. It presupposes adequate answers to questions raised by the community, be it small or big, be it that of a town, region, country or a union of countries.

Eclectic has generally been accepted to mean pertaining of the middle, i.e. keeping the balance, and not going to an extreme in either direction. It also means making use of the best from many resources. In education eclecticism can be seen to cater for a wide variety of individual preferences, abilities, interests, needs and objectives. Thus it allows more people to get more most of the time. It is a very democratic approach to language teaching allowing for a freedom of choice.

Some theoreticians understand eclecticism as combining a type of syllabus with an unmatching type methodology. Willis (1990) sees an eclectic approach as a response to the conflict between syllabus and methodology, which for him "are not discrete options". The solution is quite a feasible one, even though the starting point is arguable, since syllabus and methodology are clearly and rightly discrete elements and can either complement each other or hinder each other. It is often the well-chosen methodology that can remedy many of the faults of a bad syllabus, but also can, if badly chosen and implemented, fail the best syllabus. Willis (1990: 6) claims that:

"If we choose a syllabus which specifies an inventory of language forms, it is difficult to see how we can achieve this syllabus by means of a communicative methodology. And if we want to use a communicative methodology in which learners use language freely, it is difficult to see how we can then specify what language forms will be covered by this methodology."

Such a view is in a way unconvincing because the teaching and learning experiences and practices of FLT have proved, especially in recent years, that an effective coexistence and functioning of a given type of syllabus with a methodology which does not directly correspond and match, can produce good results. Such a synthesis fills in gaps, bridges differences and reconciles contradictions thus providing as varied and complex experience with the foreign language as the language itself is.

Another opinion in favour of eclecticism is that of Brumfit (1984). He recommends that a language learning programme should provide a balance of activities, some of which focus on accuracy and some on fluency. Accuracy presupposes a focus on form and fluency – on exchanging meaning, accomplishing tasks and reaching outcomes. Such a balance could be achieved by employing, let us say, a structural syllabus and realising it by means of a communicative methodology, one, which involves presentation and practice techniques, as well as a transfer of language skills from one situation to another. Under such a methodology, learners are encouraged to use language for meaningful purposes and communicate effectively with whatever language they have.

Eclecticism can have different manifestation. It may concern the way a syllabus is designed. Crombie points out a recent tendency – syllabus designers accept eclecticism as offering better opportunities for better teaching. “Increasingly, syllabus designers seem to be adopting the view that the best syllabus will, in many cases, be one which is based on eclecticism: one which emerges from a combination of approaches rather than from a single approach” (Crombie 1985: 10). An eclectic approach to syllabus design means combining different approaches and integrating them to produce a working whole, e.g. – elements from a structural syllabus combined with elements from a functional-based syllabus; elements from a structural syllabus combined with elements from a situational syllabus, etc. “The real issue is not which syllabus to put first: it is how to integrate eight or so syllabuses (functional, notional, situational, topic, phonological, lexical, structural, skills) into a sensible teaching programme” (Swan 1990: 89). Such a view is both sensible and practical and no doubt offers greater opportunities for effective learning/teaching of foreign languages under specific local conditions. The variety of syllabus elements involved in an eclectic syllabus allows for greater freedom in overcoming the constraints of a teaching situation be they financial, administrative or pedagogical. What one kind of syllabus cannot achieve or provide, is achieved or provided by some of the others. More flexible teaching techniques can be employed for gaining the set objectives. Learning becomes more attractive as the foreign language classroom offers greater variety for the learners. It enhances language acquisition by increasing the chances for people with different learning preferences and styles to access the foreign language and, by practising it, gain the necessary linguistic competence.

Swan (1990:90) seems to suggest most outspokenly a really avant guard approach to lesson organisation, course and syllabus design.

“How we organise a given lesson will therefore depend very much on the specific point we want to teach. A good language course is likely to include lessons which concentrate on particular structures, lessons which deal with areas of vocabulary, lessons on functions, situation-based lessons, pronunciation lessons, lessons on productive and receptive skills, and several other kinds of components. Many lessons will deal with more than one of these things at the same time. Designing a language course involves reconciling a large number of different and often conflicting priorities, and it is of little use to take one aspect of the language (structures, notions/functions, or anything else) and to use this systematically as a framework for the whole of one’s teaching.”

Traditionally, attitudes to existing methods of teaching English as a foreign language are in black and white – this method or approach is bad because it is outdated and does not bring about the desired outcomes, and, respectively, that one is good, because it is novel, innovative, communicative, etc. This has led to the complete neglect of this or that method or approach in favour of a more recent one. A deeper insight into all the existing methods or approaches will undoubtedly reveal a number of advantageous characteristics which make them more appropriate for particular learners, in particular circumstances, in view of particular needs, in compliance with particular learning, social, educational, and economic constraints.

An eclectic approach based on the structural, functional-notional and communicative approaches to language teaching could keep a balance of accuracy and fluency. The advantages of an eclectic approach are considerable. There is a lot to recommend it, especially if the fact that learners learn differently is taken into consideration. The learning situation is usually such that there is not one learner on a course and the teacher has to adopt such methods that will cater for the majority of individual learners. There is a multiplicity of implications in this for both learners and teachers, e.g. the learning environment must be input-rich to offer room and variety for choice; both learners and teachers must be aware of the peculiarities of the learning process and of how each individual learns.

It can be claimed that eclecticism in foreign language learning/teaching is not a catchphrase. It is not openly adopted by theoreticians and practitioners for reasons verging on the fear of being branded as inconsistent, superficial or lacking in a solid theoretical background and understanding. However, plenty of practising teachers of foreign languages, resort to eclecticism to various degrees and at different stages of the learning/teaching process in an attempt to remedy the imperfections of this or that method, syllabus, materials or classroom technique.

The awesome complexity of life and human experience today refutes one-sided postulates and creeds. There is a great demand for variety and ingenious exploitation of the accumulated human experience and expertise in the field of foreign language learning and teaching. The new learning environments worldwide comprising the ubiquitous presence and use of the Worldwide Web and the increased mobility of foreign language learners result in an increase in the variety of sources for learning a foreign language. Even though it cannot be a panacea, a multi-faceted eclectic approach could guarantee that the needs and interests of the learners and society be met to a much greater extent than a one-sided approach to foreign language learning/teaching. A quest for new linguistic theories and methods is unlikely to succeed. Our quest should be into the existing examples of good practice which reflect the centuries-old experience of the specialists in the field.

References:

Brumfit, C. J. 1984. *Communicative Methodology in Language Learning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crombie, W. 1985. *Discourse and Language Learning: A Relational Approach to Syllabus Design*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Swan, M. 1990. 'A critical look at the communicative approach' in Rossner, R. and Bolitho, R. (eds.) *Currents of Change in English Language Teaching*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.73 – 98.

Tarone, E. and **G. Yule.** 1989. *Focus on the Language Learner*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Willis, D. 1990. *The Lexical Syllabus: A new approach to language teaching*, London: Harper Collins Publishers.

БСУ УЦД